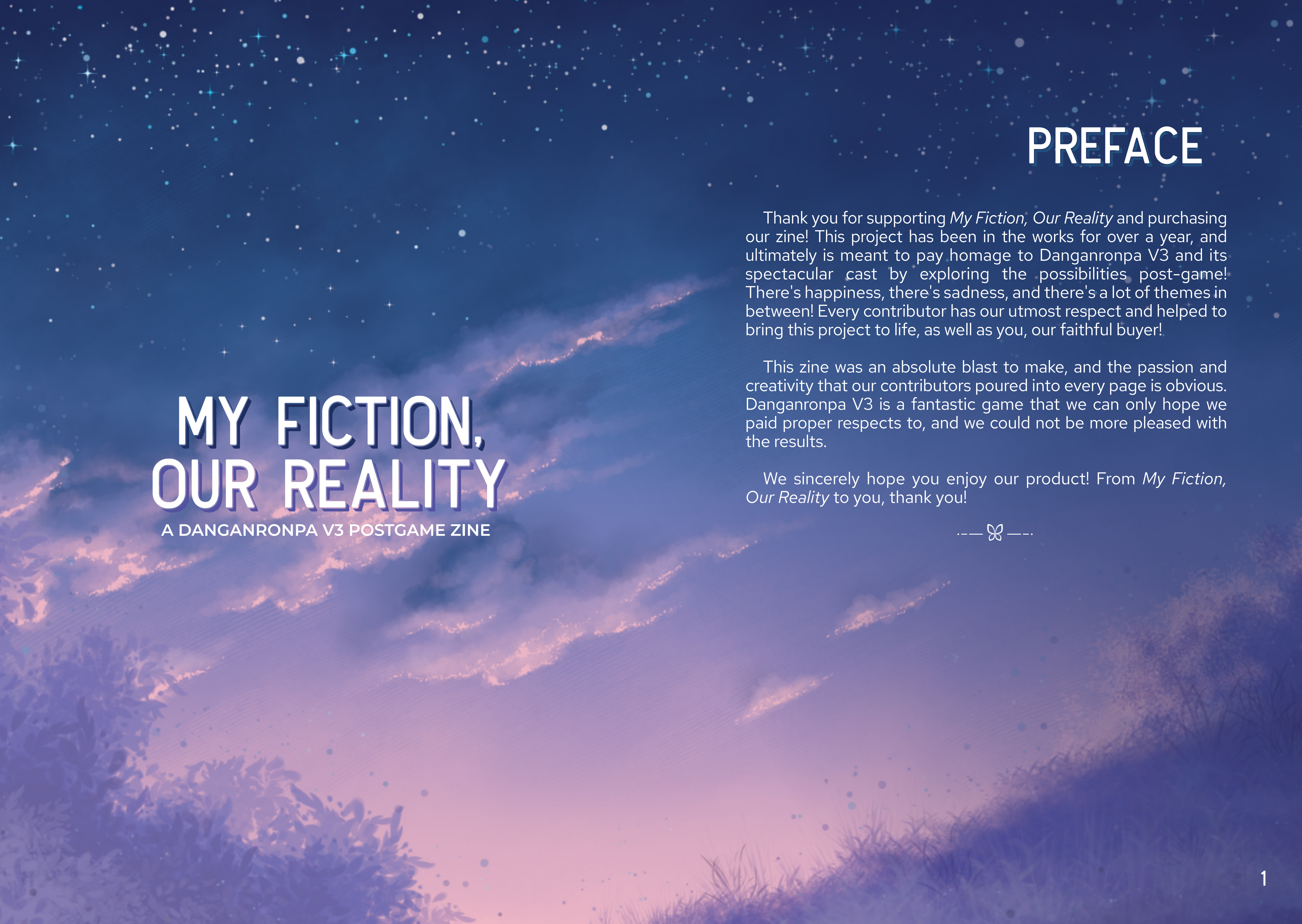
MY FICTION, OUR REALITY

A DANGANRONPA V3 POSTGAME ZINE



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PREFACE

Thank you for supporting *My Fiction, Our Reality* and purchasing our zine! This project has been in the works for over a year, and ultimately is meant to pay homage to Danganronpa V3 and its spectacular cast by exploring the possibilities post-game! There's happiness, there's sadness, and there's a lot of themes in between! Every contributor has our utmost respect and helped to bring this project to life, as well as you, our faithful buyer!

This zine was an absolute blast to make, and the passion and creativity that our contributors poured into every page is obvious. Danganronpa V3 is a fantastic game that we can only hope we paid proper respects to, and we could not be more pleased with the results.

We sincerely hope you enjoy our product! From *My Fiction, Our Reality* to you, thank you!

SoldierEL

THE REBIRTH OF RANTARO AMAMI

by Naptastic

When he wakes up,

(for the first time)

all that surrounds him is white.

There is an incessant whirring that whisks away his thoughts, tubes and needlework threading through his skin as if it was once misshapen patchwork to be fixed. It's hard to breathe, with the way machinery wraps around his chest, a seam pulled too tight in the process of stitching. He can't inhale too deeply, each breath measured meticulously so as not to choke.

Almost, just almost, he could compare it to the horrid push and pull of those lockers, too small to fit in and filled with the vile smell of rusting metal.

(How does he know *that*?)

It takes a while, but he masters breathing, short strokes coming close to natural, barely dependent on his thought. It is then that the monotony of his situation sets in, the only company a bright, cold ceiling and the even sounds of beeping. Time slows to a halt.

He's clued in that there's at least someone else here, with him, that he takes as meagre comfort. Occasional sounds of page flipping and quiet sighing queue him to this fact, always a welcome interruption to the mechanical din.

He tries to lift his head— just a little, to gather a view of his surroundings. Even though dizziness hits almost immediate, slow satisfaction runs its course as he spots a man, ruffled black hair and coat white enough to blend in with the walls sitting turned away from him.

The man notices. Thankfully.

He places his chair to the side, shuffles over to his side, shadow peering over. He studies his face, dotted with acne and eyebags, glasses dangling over the bridge of his nose, focuses hungrily on the imperfections. They're a welcome sight in comparison to the almost filtered lens of—

Of... what?

(In truth, it is the first person he has seen in a long, long time.)

The man looks down, odd smile on his lips.

"Rantaro Amami," he greets.

That is how *he* is given a name. They do not know it, but he considers it the moment of his birth.

* * *

There's a collected miscellany of people that crowd his room, now. They fill the silence with rapid paced footsteps, quiet mumblings, and busied work. It does nothing to relieve him of his previous problems: the boredom causing each of his nerves to be alight.

He's constantly fidgeting with his blanket, or pillow, or any utility they let him have his hands on. They speak to him as if he is a child to be coddled (which... in a sense, he supposes he is).

He does not know if he is supposed to feel quite this lonely when there are so many people around him.

In a detached, almost careless tone, a doctor had come in that first night he had woken up, as nurses rushed to get him sitting up, puffed pillows behind his back, made sure not to disturb any of his wires and pulled the blanket to cover his stomach. Rantaro receives the man with a smile that is not returned.

"Amami Rantaro," he starts, not looking up and staring intently at his clipboard, "You have lost your memory."

There is more detail that comes after that. A TV show called *Danganronpa*, world first reality TV, virtually made to house a deadly concept. Now on its 53rd season.

He was– is (?) a participant. On multiple seasons, even. He came back, and back, and back, and now he's stuck in a hospital for all coming back was worth. *Memory overload*, the doctor explains, as if Rantaro's life was just a speck in the ocean, another statistic to be listed off.

He supposes, in a sense, it is. The doctor looks at him expectantly like he's supposed to know what to do, at the end of the spiel. Rantaro tilts his head, repeats the question back to him wordlessly: *What am I supposed to do?*

(Nobody's answered it properly, yet.)

The doctor sighs as if disappointed, a flicker of *something* that passes through in an instant and pushes himself off the chair with considerable effort. Rantaro frowns, wants to ask what he did wrong, to garner such a reaction. He decides against it, not wanting to stumble through his words towards such a cold man.

As the doctor leaves though, he stops at the doorway and looks back at Rantaro one more time. He looks tired.

"Amami-san, off the record; don't renew your contract again," he sounds pained as he says it. "I'm tired of seeing you here."

That was a week ago. Rantaro counts the days, waiting for something more to happen. That day is today.

A mirror of the first night, a man is announced to come visit Rantaro and the nurses scramble for a couple of minutes, shuffling him to sit up, putting pillows behind his back and pulling the blanket to not be wayward on the floor. He has considerably less things plugged into him now, slowly shedding layers of colour and leaving the whole room more barren.

Rantaro would've like to think he could have done it himself, but he doesn't want to risk asking when they're murmuring amongst themselves like he exists as a prop. The man is a stark contrast to everything else in his room, adorned in blacks. He has a small notebook in his hand and a mousy woman trails behind him, clutching an assortment of papers close to her chest.

The nurses slowly leave the room, quietly as if they weren't there in the first place.

There's a bear with one jarring red eye lying on the breast pocket of the man's blazer. Rantaro has seen it before. It fills him with unease. He pulls out a monochrome pen, and slowly as if preparing himself, he raises his head and smiles wide.

The man asks him to join Danganronpa Season 54.

Ba

Dump.

He feels panic spike. So soon? (So soon for *what*?)

There's an instinctual dread that fills him up like he's up to his lungs in water. He remembers the doctor's words, but more than that, there's something else in his brain that's signalled an alarm, ticking a thousand signals a second, screaming *no, no, no* so loudly that barely anything else can fill his head.

Saying yes here, would be a mistake, but Rantaro looks at his expectant gaze and can't say no. What would the old Rantaro say? What would anyone he knows say? He strains, trying to squeeze out every last piece of experience he's seen here in this boxed off room.

He asks for more time, with a relaxed smile and a slight bow.

The man does not like that.

He is no longer smiling, eyes judging instead of expectant. It only takes a second for him to switch back to his previous expression. Rantaro now finds it sickly sweet.

"You had given the same answer at the beginning of Season 53. We had hoped for a firmer answer, after your death, but it seems you need more time."

He clicks his fingers, and his assistant jolts up, leaves a pamphlet on Rantaro's bedside table. He gives it a quick side glance— a recruitment form for Season 54, information outlined in squares of red.

"We at Danganronpa will ask again, at the end of the season. Feel free to contact us earlier."

The man leaves, and once the door shuts, it was like he was never there to begin with. The room trickles in with people— a nurse asks him to extend his arm to take his blood pressure.

He wonders what he did wrong.

(The first proper lesson that Rantaro learns – teaches himself – is to lie. That lying is more correct than the truth, often, for people like him.)

* * *

They say he's better. Well enough to leave his room. He has no say in this, so instead he just smiles and tries his best to ignore the thumping of his heartbeat and the shaking in his hands.

It's a quick arrangement; he tries his best to cooperate. They go to a new location, across the hospital building. A nurse helps him up on crutches, and it's an achingly slow journey that he hates every minute of.

The nurse sees him through it. She's kind and pitying and he basks in it and hates it all the same. Before they enter the building, he reviews what he knows: It's specialised for Danganronpa participant care, Akamatsu, who killed him, is already there, and it is where he'll spend at least the next three months.

The nurse squeezes him.

(Akamatsu is not Akamatsu, but Kaede, just as he is Rantaro and not Amami. She squeezes him tight the first time they meet and apologises and apologises and apologises for something he does not remember. He hugs her back and whispers his truth in her ear.

She is Kaede, with short, cropped hair cut straight, neck length, blonde with sweeping bangs, memories of cynicism and optimism and murder and death all in her head, wrapped, not neatly, but in a little bow. He is Rantaro. Just Rantaro. There is nothing else there.)

Once administration is sorted, they hand him tapes labelled *Danganronpa V3*, put them in his hands, tell him sweetly that these may help. Rantaro is so relieved he could cry.

The Rantaro Amami he sees in the tapes is amazing. The fact he loses his memories is unfair, he wants to be exactly like the man in the frame. There's so much to piece together, so much to see. He gets phantom sensations, sometimes, watching them, like when the man in the black suit asked him the question.

He trusts these. These were *his*. His ideals, his memories, the last remnants of *Rantaro Amami* before he was shattered, and the mosaic crumbled to be nothing but a plain glass shard. The doctors say there is little hope of returning to what he was before. To become Rantaro Amami, fully.

Rantaro works with. He jots down his facial expressions, his quirks, the way he speaks. He asks for a transcript and annotates with red, black, and blue crayon in every crevice of space he can find on those papers. Kaede helps, sometimes, when she isn't mysteriously missing.

(He wants to ask her where she goes. He knows better than to.)

The staff gives them small paper baggies of popcorn and let them stay up later. Kaede jokes it's like a sleepover.

Kaede doesn't smile around him, and he takes it as a point to savour. She doesn't treat him like the hospital staff or the Danganronpa employees, which she gives perfected beaming grins and shy sheepish smirks on a whim like they're candy on Halloween.

In the dark, only illuminated by a TV screen, all she looks is tired, bags under her eyes accentuated by the light, and attention focused too much to put on airs. Rantaro receives this kindness by doing the same. He does not try to be Amami here, with her. He asks all he wants to and pretends not to notice her tells, doesn't adjust to them though his instincts scream to.

Tonight, they watch Amami paint Akamatsu's nails, Tsumugi exasperated in the background. *Must be more brotherly*, he notes in his head. There's no need to bring up his sisters, that pretence is gone along with his backstory.

He pretends to not see Kaede watching him as the scene continues. She looks like she wants to say something, with her knees tucked close to her chest and her gently swaying head that betrays fatigue. He does not ask.

* * *

Ryoma dies anyway, so Amami's efforts were in vain. What would he feel about this, if he were the one to see his friend be reduced to bones, if his impact really meant nothing?

Rantaro does not know. Ryoma's going to wake up any day now. He feels the familiar thumping of his heart.

At the cafeteria, quietly, he begs Kaede not to let them know. Not to let Ryoma and his killer and whoever else ends up eventually dying to know. She looks horrified, as he clutches her hands and shakes all over.

It's his final act as Rantaro, to her. She says yes, and he nearly collapses in pure relief, but in exchange, she starts smiling towards him, too sweet for him to look her in the eyes.

Ryoma, and then Kirumi, don't notice, too caught up in their own introspection and perhaps each other's. Occasionally, they give him an odd glance, and look as if they want to pry. Rantaro tilts his head and laughs their concerns off.

It continues this trend, as people wake up, as the game continues. It helps they have more memories, that Rantaro Amami was the fading beginning act, dead before it really, truly started. He's fading into the background once again, but this time he's glad. This is by his own design.

Things become clearer once the game ends.

Tsumugi reveals all of it in a group therapy session everyone knew she wasn't ready to attend. She continues talking as they haul her off. Everyone else stares worriedly at the scene; Kaede gives him a pointed glance, fumbling with her bangs. Rantaro says nothing and stares blankly at Tsumugi's chair.

He originated from the 48th season of Danganronpa as the Ultimate Adventurer. He was a plain enough character, well liked for his design and personality. Not grating. One of the four survivors. People were happy enough. Then, as a surprise guest, he came for the 49th season. He survived again. It became a running joke: Amami Rantaro, Ultimate Survivor.

He joins back again, for the 51st. Then the 53rd.

It's a little lonely sometimes, portraying someone else, though. Sometimes in the dead of night, he wishes that they would know him as Rantaro, because it's exhausting, so exhausting, to smile like someone he's not.

Kokichi squints as him distrustfully, never talks to him unless required, and Shuuichi suspects something, Rantaro knows he does, as he side-eyes him warily. It's a tell he's kept from the game. Rantaro tends to ignore it.

Kaede keeps to her promise. He never sees her anymore, anyway. Those nights they stayed up and watched clips feel like nothing more than a dream that's ready to be forgotten.

His Amami impression isn't perfect, but it's working. The imperfections can be smoothed out.

The season ends.

Why did Rantaro Amami, in the end, go back for so many seasons, so many killing games?

Rantaro does not know.

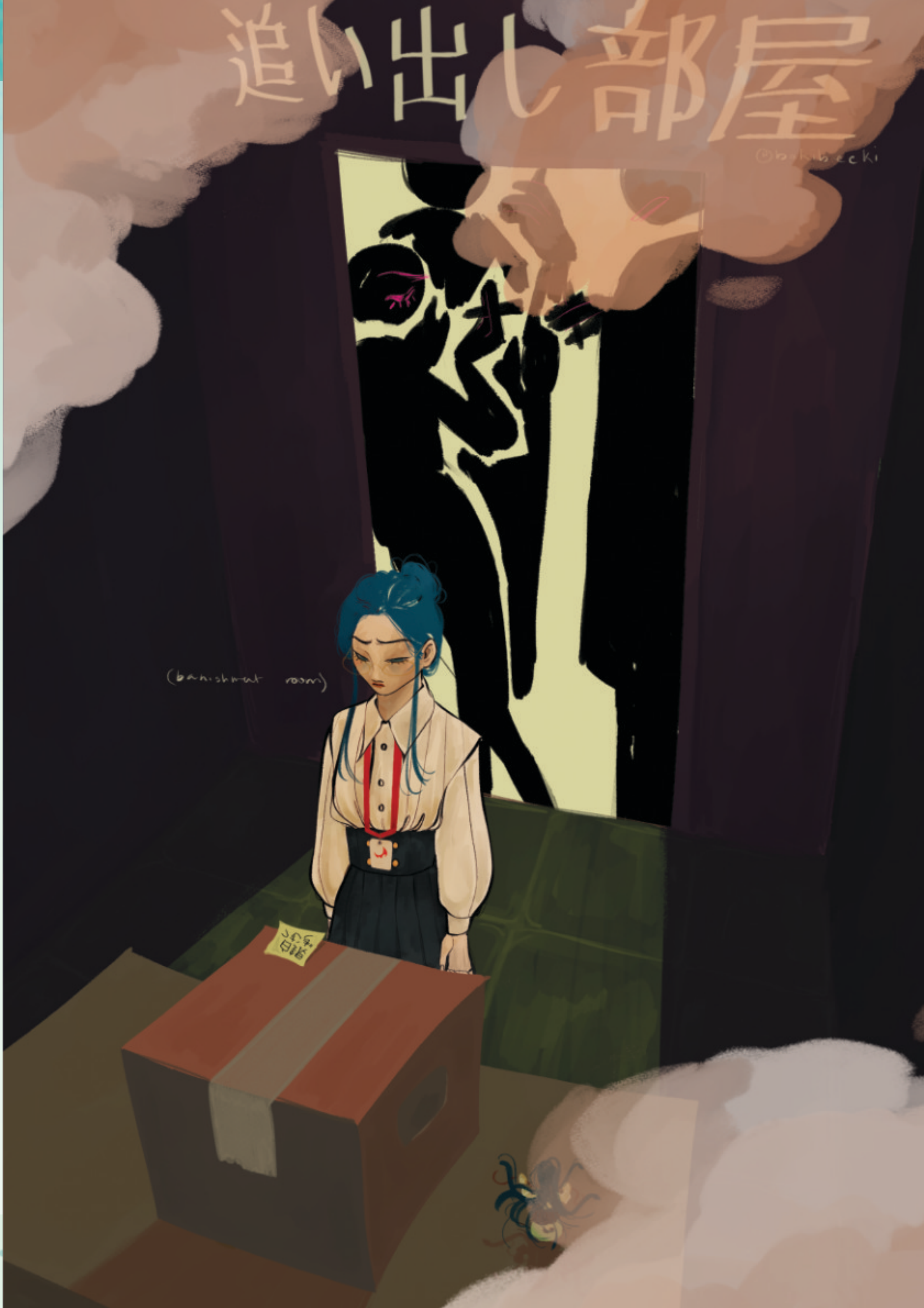
He remembers *the voice*, when the man in black asked him, those first few weeks of his life. Dread, terror, panic. Amami did not want to go back. Amami is not Rantaro. Rantaro does not want to stay a shadow.

(They write him anew, every game.)

The man in black comes back with the same offer, same saccharine smile.

Rantaro smiles back.

* * *



and if i cannot reach heaven, i will simply have to make it myself

by Topher

God says to her, Angie, my darling, it is heavenly to be patient.

The hem of her hospital gown drags slowly and serenely across the sterile tiles. Angie imagines herself held aloft by His arms, floating through life as a reward for her unwavering loyalty.

A man in a stuffy looking suit sitting at a stuffy looking desk clears his throat impatiently, his voice droning on and on about recovery periods and therapy and prize money, and even a family waiting for her when she's ready.

Angie clasps her hands together and imagines light pouring out of her skin and through her teeth, underneath her fingernails, her eyelids, brushing against the soft hairs at the nape of her neck.

Team Danganronpa expects their most recent cast to spend a minimum of six months here at their privately funded, remote hospital.

Angie smiles, and allows her answering words to flow out of her like song, like an easy acceptance. After all, six months is so very, very short when compared to her eternal life.

* * *

God sings to Angie and reminds her that generosity is a truly blessed virtue.

So Angie keeps her arms wide open and gives back everything she can to mankind. There is a reason God gifted her with a miniscule portion of His ability to create, and Angie does her best to embody the blank canvas He intended her to be. She reminds her fellow classmates that she is here for them, always. She is here to give them what they need; she is here to become what they need.

Shuichi, more often than not, simply needs someone to talk to. He is too used to getting all the attention he wishes from his friends, and quite unused to their occupation with their own healing. What Shuichi needs is a rapt, fascinated subject, to go on without purpose about their own lives and make him feel better about his. Angie slips into the role naturally, bobbing her head back and forth and telling stories of the family that God gave to her, real or not.

Angie knows she has succeeded when Shuichi leaves and does not feel the need to go knocking on Kaito or Kaede's door.

Kokichi, on the other hand, needs someone that allows him to be smaller than he is. An already slight boy, he requires a hiding spot that has not yet been discovered by the executives pleading for his life. When Kokichi scurries in, Angie offers him a spot beneath her bed and cocks her head in confusion when the men in suits come knocking. They tire of listening to her after not too long, and the boy that has been reduced to a mouse and further reduced to roadkill stays still for hours even after they've left.

Angie politely does not watch him leave or ask him to do so, and subsequently feels God's warm gaze on her when he finally does.

Most commonly, Miu needs someone she can scream at. Angie bumps into her on their way back from dinner and Miu too-easily lights up, like a defective firecracker. She rants on and on about the unfairness of the game, of their friends, of the whole damn world, tells Angie she can take her God and shove it up her ass, pounds her fists against the walls of their enclosure and heaves with cries.

Angie makes sure to give her the replies she's looking for while also informing her of God's grace, and when Miu finally tires, she lets the girl's sobs soak into her gown.

Angie molds herself into what the others require her to be as easily as she had warped the wax of her classmates, and heavenly satisfaction is wrought upon her.

* * *

God whispers, Angie, my dearest disciple, kindness is a divine act.

Angie keeps these words on the very tip of her tongue, rolls them around in her mouth, parts her lips just to enjoy the taste. What a holy woman she is, smiling at each and every life she encounters in the halls. What a blessed calling it is, to only ever be expected to give up something she already owns in droves, an unending cattle of tender words that she has graciously been given to watch over.

At night, Angie gets to her knees and allows them to bruise, allows her body to ache as she poses in supplication and asks Him to give her classmates- cast members- friends- the same bounty that Angie has been given. She asks Him to fill in the gaps of them where she cannot, asks Him to lend them warmth in all the spots she cannot reach.

God praises honesty as well, after all, and Angie knows she is only mortal. Still, she serves in every manner she can think to.

When Himiko comes to Angie crying, asking for a friendship she had scorned for too long, Angie welcomes her with open arms and offers her a river of affection that will never run dry.

When Rantaro wanders through the halls and reveals the fractured state of his own mind, Angie beckons him into her room and draws the scenes he can still remember so that he will never lose grip on them again.

When Korekiyo looks up at her through hair cut unevenly and an ugly, sniveling expression, Angie- Angie-

Angie flinches.

* * *

At night, Angie dreams of too-cold hands dragging her across wooden boards and through empty, uncaring hallways.

Her death had been quick as a bullet. Angie is sure of this. Angie is sure God had granted her this mercy.

Only during the depths of night does Angie tangle a hand in the hair at the back of her head and feel for the sticky adhesive of duct tape. In the dark, while tossing and turning before sleep finally takes her, at least Angie can pretend that she does not know what she is doing.

* * *

Angie, God chides, forgiveness is the attitude of saints.

Angie runs through a list of everything she knows about saints; their generous characters, their exemplary teachings, their easy humility. Their deaths.

Angie smiles. She is, at least, part way there.

Still, she could always be better. God has taught her this. The game- well, the game didn't teach her anything. Nothing good, anyways. Nothing Angie wishes to take home with her. But still, she knows there are improvements to be made. Perfection is unfortunately not a saintly attribute, nor is it a very human one, as much as Angie strives for it.

God reminds her that there is faith to be found in destitution. Suffering is, after all, merely one step away from worship.

Angie pushes her bed, mattress and covers and all, out into the hallway of the hospital grounds. She refuses the meals brought to her by staff and friends alike, allows Tenko and Himiko and Shuichi only to enter her room empty handed.

Angie has no need for material goods, nor does she have need for any sustenance other than the faith she gorges herself on. Her body, whole and hollow and blurred at the edges post-death, has no need to be filled regardless.

Angie smiles, and God smiles down at her in return.

* * *

14 days. 14 days are allowed to pass before God recreates the world. God, or perhaps the nurses, or perhaps Shirogane herself.

14 days go round and round for Angie in near bliss, her eyes appropriately unfocused, body breaking out in goose pimples, hands shaking like that of a martyr as she draws and draws and draws in an attempt to make God's will reality.

Each work gets her closer to becoming truly, fully heaven-sent, she's sure of it. If Angie can simply capture the right angle, can simply manifest the correct shade, God's word will become as clear as the days that pass before her.

Angie needs to relearn forgiveness, and she needs to learn it right this time. Obviously, she did not properly absorb His lessons the first time around, and she just needs to see them in front of her once more.

Just once more, please, but Angie is dragged from her begging before she can even hope to get close to reaching Him.

* * *

Once again, there are the too-cold hands. Once again, there is the piercing of flesh.

Angie hopes, for just a moment, that she's being crucified.

* * *

There exist in the world passings of time that are not actually passing. Angie thinks that some call this memory, but she does not feel enough ownership of these moments to truly call them such.

There is the feeling of her friends wrapped tightly within her embrace. There is her tight grip on a flashlight, a sculpting tool, a ceremonial knife. There is a costume made just for her, held by careful, adoring fingers. There are cameras trained intently on her figure. There is the rattle of a school bus, the chatter of mundanity that Angie would do anything to escape.

And then, as with all of God's plans, there is light.

* * *

There is light, and the unrelenting drip of an IV, and an empty chair next to her bed. Her mattress has been returned. Her drawings have been destroyed. The world; recreated.

* * *

Angie is certain that God is still whispering to her, telling her what she has done wrong and what must be done to correct it, but He is so, so quiet.

The IV drips, and Angie's head turns towards the barred window of her room. The IV drips, and Angie's head swivels at the sound of knocking on her door.

The ugly, sniveling boy enters after a moment of silence, and his face pales at the sight of Angie lying so still in bed, dressed in all white like a ghost, or perhaps a bride who's been left at the altar once and for all. Angie blinks, and still she does not say anything. She practices forgiveness a million times over within a split second in her head, she envisions herself smiling, standing and drifting over to envelop Korekiyo in a hug only the divine could bestow.

She does not move. She does not even speak.

"Yonaga-san-" Korekiyo creaks out, his voice sounding unused and gravelly beneath his surgical mask, "I- I wanted to say- about what happened-"

No need, Korekiyo. Angie understands, Angie imagines herself saying.

"God says you should leave," is what comes out instead.

Korekiyo quivers, looking just like the sad, sinful man he is; work of fiction or not. "I do not intend to cause you any harm," he continues carefully, "I just wanted to apologize, before any more time-"

"God says you should leave," Angie repeats, voice shaking in a way that is so far removed from saintly she can hardly even hear herself, "God- Angie thinks-"

"Please, Yonaga-san-"

"I said you need to *go*," Angie finds herself shrieking, arm rearing back to grab a pillow from her bed and toss it across the room at her murderer like a woman possessed, like the devil has personally taken her body into his hands, "I said go. Go!"

Korekiyo goes, and Angie collapses back into bed with all her strings finally severed.

* * *

God still speaks to her. Angie knows it. Angie dreams it. She has made mistakes, but she can always do better. She can always make herself into someone better.

She tries, of course. She practices her forgiveness, her generosity, her kindness in the mirror. Morphs her face into the friendliest smiles she can manage, does her best to reach out to her friends and offer them affection in whatever ways she can.

It seems as if her cattle have finally run off, though. As if her river has run dry and the land has been swallowed back up by the 40 year desert.

Angie attempts to pray, but cannot focus through the pain of her bruised knees. She attempts to sing praises, but finds her voice has gone hoarse.

At the end of it all, Angie drifted between life and death for several hours before God finally scooped her back into His arms. At the end of it all, Angie does not forgive Korekiyo Shinguuji.

* * *

God does not speak to her again. Angie is beginning to think that he never did. The resulting silence is equal parts empty and so terribly, terribly relieving to welcome back into her life.

* * *

Himiko and Tenko pout when Angie tells them she cannot hang out with them when they ask, but they seem to understand well enough after a moment. They will simply have to find a game to play that requires only two today.

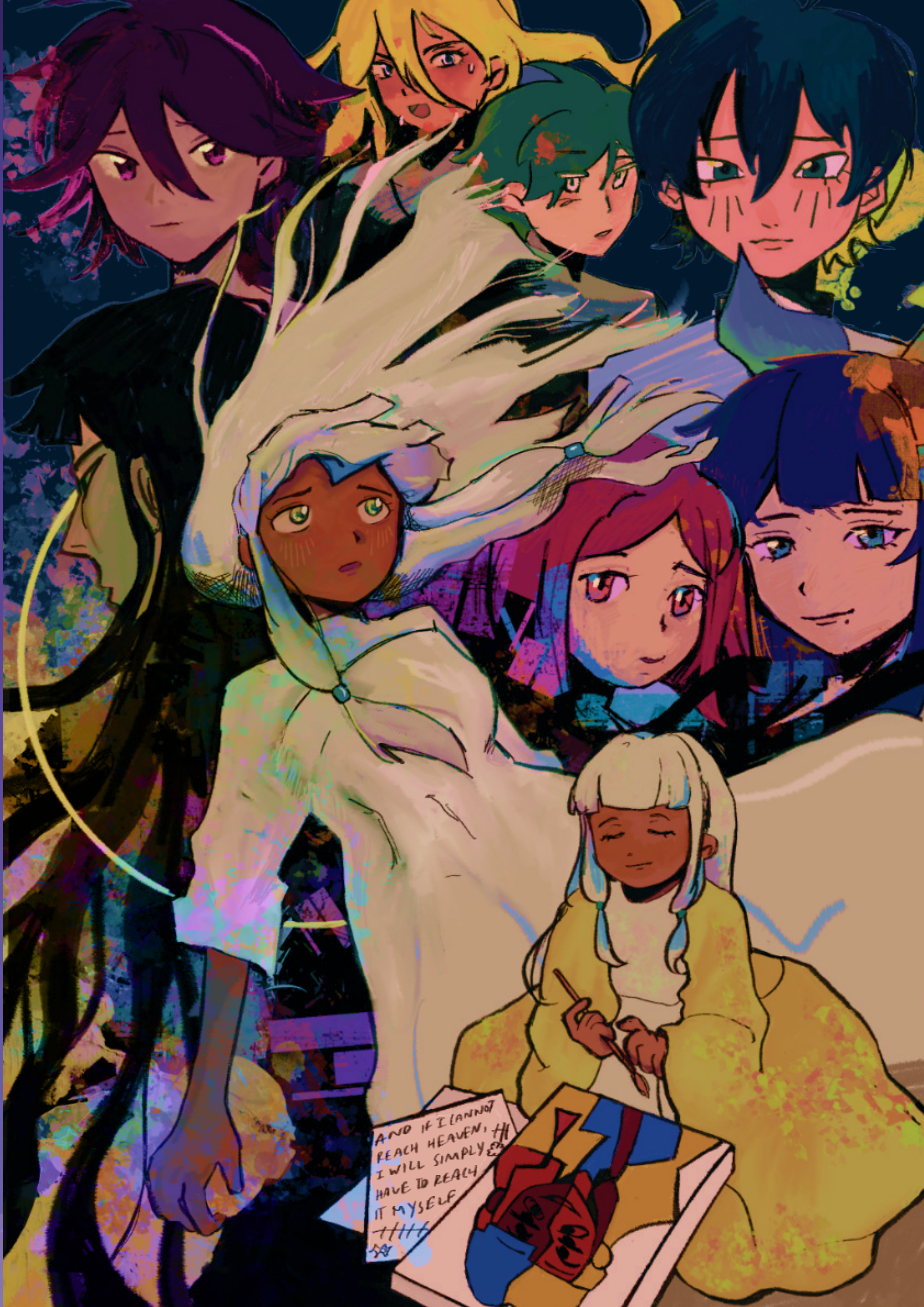
Angie takes her time preparing herself, changing from her hospital standard nightgown into a simple pair of shorts and a sweater that she'd apparently left for herself in a past life. She gathers her supplies into her hands and takes her time really feeling the heft of them, running her fingers across each pencil and dragging her nails along the textured pages of her sketchbook.

She walks slowly, feet solid on the ground, no longer dragging like that of a ghost, or perhaps of a corpse. The feeling is odd, the linoleum too cold, but Angie continues to endure just to capture the sensation.

She brings herself into the small garden she's just been given privileges to spend time in again. It is the seventh month of her stay here, and Angie is full, her body a weight that she refuses to let go of, an impatient but not unbidden energy running through her. The morning dew brushes against her skin and seeps into her shorts as she sits in the cool grass.

Angie sets up her supplies, and she begins to draw without a single purpose or prayer in mind.

* * *



execute Action(encore);

by Alerane

```
>
>
> boot Sequence start();
> boot Sequence failed;
> Troubleshoot? Input Y OR NO (DEFAULT Y);
> Y
> ERROR TYPE: INCOMPLETE_SHUTDOWN_INSTANCE;
> ERROR TYPE: POWER_USAGE_UNSAFE_LEVELS;
> ERROR TYPE: 404_APPENDAGE_NOT_FOUND;
> execute Action(diagnostic);
> RESULT: Limited functions detected;
> RECOMMEND: Return to repair terminal;
> execute Action(retry);
> Ignore ERRORS? Input Y OR N (DEFAULT Y);
> Y
> boot Sequence start();
> Initializing Instance() AI.K1-B0;
> AI Systems Online;
```

Machinery whirred to life. Hums, clicks, and an occasional ugly grinding sound. They were close, but familiar, like a human hearing their own heart beating in their chest. The quiet aside from those, that was unsettling.

Why, though? Quiet had been commonplace at the lab; the professor turned off the instruments he was using before leaving at night. The lights too. Slowly Kiibo opened his eyes, the bright sun filtering in through his lenses just as his more recently backed up memory banks came back online.

This wasn't the lab. This was the Ultimate Academy. What was left of it.

From where he lay he peered up at the shattered sky, like a kaleidoscope above him, the hole broken in it showing at a few angles at once. He blinked, disoriented, then stopped, closing one eye then the other. Oh. There was a fracture in his lens, not just the break in the dome. He closed that eye experimentally, seeing the damage he wrought first hand in decent clarity (if not depth). The true sky was bright and shining from behind the screens, not the discoloured wasteland outside the Death Road of Despair. He really did it.

Around him the wreckage of the school, dormitories and various labs were still standing in pieces. He sat up, going to lean on his arm-- and falling flat on his face with the momentum. He glanced down finally. He couldn't feel his arm. Maybe he should... take stock of himself first?

Kiibo wriggled his shoulders to shake off some of the debris, which seemed to contain parts of himself. His armour was gone in places, and unsettling strands of sparking wires hung from gaping holes in his torso. He tried not to panic. His eyes locked onto his amputated stump of an arm, his hand nowhere to be seen, but his other seemed intact if stripped of coverings in places. He attempted to move his legs under the wreckage and found only one responding, the other absent and disconnected. Still, he was in remarkably sound condition for self-destructing. He reached up gingerly to his collar and face to find his head was quite secure still, cracks aside.

His assessment complete, Kiibo tried to get up once more, finding the edge of a chunk of concrete and hoisting his frame upwards, his balance teetering on one leg. He could hear the strain in his workings, and he didn't like it. *It sounds like I might explode* *again, or combust. What then?* The thought came apprehensively, and was greeted with silence, not just outside, but inside his own head. Baffled only a moment, he remembered: The audience was gone.

His inner voice, that had been so cruelly shown to not be a guiding force to rely on, but the very people who wanted to see him and his friends suffer. They tried to erase him entirely for the vote. Yet he was here, and they weren't. The constant direction was gone again, despite the antennae remaining affixed. Perhaps they all stopped checking when he went offline?

How long was he offline?

The robot turned quickly, to inspect the field. Was the grass longer? He wasn't sure, but there was nothing in flames or smoking so this couldn't be right where his memory left off. Where were his friends? He reviewed his footage of his last moments. There was the pocket he'd left them. Without thinking the rest through he started off towards the spot, falling flat on his face. He picked himself up, hopping with purpose to where he last saw them. On arrival he compared the image in his memory to what he saw. The rocks had moved! Had they gotten out? Or had someone else taken them? There were so many questions-

A wave of dizziness hit without warning and Kiibo lost his footing again. What? He was puzzled for a moment, trying to find the problem. He must be low charge, that needed replenishment at least once a week. Or did the blast from his self-destruct drain charge? He supposed it could, it didn't need to be efficient, there wasn't supposed to be any of him left. A lucky flaw really, but he couldn't let his battery die completely. No one was here to perform maintenance on him. That thought washed over him sadly as he recovered. He started toward the ruins of the school. He'd *have* to find somewhere to charge.

As he hopped and grasped, without even a crutch, his eyes returned to the sky. The false screens were falling away leaving dark spots, making the illusion they had provided all the more artificial. Seeing that something brighter was beyond the barrier he breached, a sense of accomplishment filled his chest.

Beyond what was left of the dormitory, he skirted the edge of the rock by the entrance of the school, looking pointedly away from the stain leaking out from beneath it, darker and dry. Kiibo recalled one of the screens Monokuma used was in the entrance hall, so if he could wedge his way in he... Well, what could he do? Siphon power? Would that work? He didn't know the specs or voltage. Should he hotwire himself like a stolen car?

He waited on the threshold for an answer, before realizing there wasn't going to be one. Right. The only voice he had to rely on here was his own. Ironically, the last time he relied on his own voice he decided to blow up the school. He did partly succeed there, so that was an encouraging track record!

Right?

He picked his way into the hazardous building, chunks of the outer facade about his path. His remaining hand gripped tighter as another wave of static filled his head. He absolutely couldn't stop now. Items from upper floors had fallen into the atrium, identifiably from labs that had been close to the rails. He crossed awkwardly, over silverware and insect cases, and tripped over Kokichi's trapdoor with a clatter. It sounded more like a recycling bin than the proud Ultimate Robot. He suffered the indignity of scooting across the floor the last few paces then propped himself against the monitor. His eyes zoomed, seeking a port or wire, and settled on the cable behind it. With already fragile fingers, he untwisted it and connected himself, hoping for a slight charge from the remaining supply.

The jolt through his system was more than he was expecting. The facility generators must still be active because every filament in his body lit up like an amusement park ride. Reeling, Kiibo blinked, head swimming with code. This wasn't the power source... this was the network. Each time he closed his eyes files, pathways, folders and protocols crossed his vision, uploading at lightning speed.

After a few blinding moments the rush of information came to a halt, and Kiibo closed his eyes to stare internally at the terminal. These didn't look like the Monopad files. The timestamps as names and larger size suggested something more substantial. It could be dangerous… his hollow stomach didn't need much convincing to feel as a pit when he remembered the control the audience had exerted over him. A trap? There were no answers or murmurs within him still. He would get by the way his friends taught him. Investigation. He went to the end of the sequence, and opened the file, feeling his machinery hum into action.

"This is the only way to bring back Hope after this mess is cleaned up. We'll have to drive the point home, even without the foreshadowing."

A familiar voice filled Kiibo's ears and his eyes flickered open in surprise. That couldn't be her, he saw what happened at the door. But lights had come alive behind his pupils and lit the cracked wall next to him and a refracted image came into focus. A dim blue lit video projection, within a dark classroom with windows showing faux stars and moon in the domed sky. And there, framed front and center at the glowing interface, staring right at him directly, was the girl who had tossed their very existences into chaos. Tsumugi Shirogane.

"If the world, their friends and families, and even Hope's Peak is counting on them, they plainly can't turn to Despair, I'm sure of it," the digital spectre muttered, her voice carried from his own speakers. This wasn't a classmate on the student council, nor the girl who stood waiting for the shuttle bus home. The cold calculating eyes behind carefully polished glasses were unnervingly serious. *"If they remember choosing to come back to save the world, they'll save this world too… right?"*

Remember… Kiibo gasped, cracking his face further in the process. This must have been when she was at the Game Master controls, making the flashback lights. Poisoning their already wiped minds with her narrative, inciting each of them to panic and attack. Supposedly the professor wiped his memory the first time, but it was much easier to tamper with his head, logistically. If Miu were here she'd know. If she hadn't seen that flashback light about the meteors, she might even still be here…

The clip ended on the image of Tsumugi with the final flashback light in hand. He balled his fist angrily. She was with them living the same hell, how could she make these decisions in such a reserved way? He moved onto the next file, then another. Each video was almost the same shot. In a few she stopped abruptly, eyes darting to the side as the recording froze. How close had a classmate come to discovering her treachery? Who was it at the door who had nearly seen the truth?

"I think the funeral is a good way to stir panic because morale is low after that execution."

"A catastrophe like this will really lean into the Ark route, which is on track. Miu won't be around to double check the pods either, so that's two birds with one stone, right?"

"I'm not all that sure about telling them they wanted to forget, it might make them more suspicious…"

"Well, it's back to the drawing board. Why did she have to smash that one? At least I can make some changes…"

"I'm worried about the card still being out there. Kokichi is right, it's a waste of a motive if no one else sees, but I plain don't like it. If someone manages to get past the outside set no one's going to be here quick enough to bring them back, that'd take too long with how isolated we are. Miu could invent a way to breathe and-"

Kiibo snapped back to attention. Rewind. What was that he just heard? He replayed it, eyeing the concern on Tsumugi's features.

"-no one's going to be here quick enough to bring them back, that'd take too long with how isolated we are-"

How isolated they were? Was this school *not* near the Team Danganronpa staff she went on about? Evident from the cracked sky, it was clear out there, nothing like the outside of that tunnel. Of course she'd said that was a set, but it dawned on him just how little he knew about what was out there.

How little the others knew, too.

Were they so far removed that resources were scarce? What if the closest people were their original captors? Dread began to spread, harkening closer and closer to the despair from before. What if he had saved them just for them to die lost?

"-but the contingency plan won't be necessary. Tell the higher-ups I am more than capable of staying in control."

The video continued to play, and 'contingency plan' had roused the robot from his spiral. Tsumugi hadn't mentioned that in the later entries. What was it?

Bolstered by this new lead, Kiibo dove back into the network, cross-referencing those keywords. No other mentions in the videos, but he didn't give up. Even if it was a quote from fiction, hope moves forward, does it not? His search returned a text manual of sorts, listing containment practices for a breach in security. Most of it used code names and was indecipherable, to his annoyance, but he happened upon one line that peaked his interest.

```
[See map: Appendix D]
```

It took less than a second for him to access and there projected in front of him was no longer the mastermind, but a map of the academy and surrounding area. If this was to be believed... To the west was completely empty, and the east was a large body of water. But where were his classmates? It wasn't as though he could call them up. If only he could see them on the map too-

Wait.

Would any of them still have their Monopad? In a pocket or forgotten? Would they even still work? They received information when Monokuma willed it... but Motherkuma was dead. Unless as a replacement receiver... he could use that.

It scared him, but he knew he could connect at a longer range. That's what the antennae was for. He searched through his memory drives, racing to find it. Find the time he was almost lost, and the direct connection that was opened up. Surely if he had access to that and the network terminal he could track their signal?

```
> execute Action(InnerVoice);
> RESULT: No users found;
> RECOMMEND: Contact admin or proceed offline
mode;
>Initializing
Connection(ultimateAcademyNetwork1);
>
>
>_Connected;
> execute Action(InnerVoice);
> Search on ultimateAcademyNetwork1? Input Y OR
N;
>Y
>RESULT: 16 users found;
```

Kiibo's fans stuttered in trepidation. Back on the display pouring from his eye dots of light were overlaying the map where each Monopad lay. A majority were under the trial grounds, lost to executions, others scattered throughout the school but... three lights showed outside of the walls.

One was not far from the academy itself, stationary, but two others were much further on, deep in the empty terrain. And moving.

He did it! Kiibo jumped up excitedly, only to tumble off his singular foot again. He propped himself up again to point the projection at the wall one last time, staring intently with it, before the garbled sound of the photo printing out of his mouth began. Thankfully that still worked. He plucked his now solid map from his face. He had enough charge now, he was certain, to make it to what was left of his lab. He'd modified himself there before, surely there was enough to try again. He was going to join his friends! As for where he could get some replacement parts... there was bound to be an Exisal left if he survived...

* * *

Danganronpa V3
V3

SICKNESS LINGERS

by grayimperia

As a child, Momota's colds would devolve into sniffles that lasted far longer than the original sickness, eventually fading and fading so it was impossible to pinpoint when they stopped altogether.

Today, sickness is different. It stays, and it mutates, and it comes back to make blood. At least, it does in his nightmares, and every time he coughs, a voice in the back of his head reminds him his dreams could soon become reality.

Momota presses the thoughts down, which is done easily enough given that his coughs stop without blood these days. Still, when he pulls the cafe door open for Saihara and Harukawa, he covers his hand with his sleeve. No harm in being a little careful.

When they order at the counter, Saihara chews on his lip for a long time before requesting a tea. He seems both proud and disappointed when his order arrives. Momota takes his own iced drink with a sleeved-covered hand and discretely wipes it down with napkins, ready with the excuse that he's just getting rid of the condensation.

"Remember: small steps matter," Momota says to Saihara. "You'll feel better once you kick your caffeine addiction. Better sleep, less shaking."

Saihara flushes. "It's still caffeinated."

"But not as much," Momota insists. "Progress!"

Harukawa rolls her eyes. "The coffee isn't the problem. He's just using it to avoid sleeping."

"And if Shuichi doesn't drink coffee, he'll get better sleep. See? Progress, Harumaki!"

She huffs and turns to her own drink. Saihara seems too embarrassed at their attention to say anymore, so it's up to Momota to push the conversation forward. "And don't think I didn't notice you were waiting for us today, Harumaki. Waiting around *other people*."

Harukawa shrugs. "It's not a big deal."

"But it is—"

"If you say, 'progress' again, I'm going to stab my straw through your eye."

After the game, Saihara confessed that he didn't sleep anymore. He'd stay up hour after hour, and the only sleep he did get was hazy states of half-awakeness. The idea of closing his eyes and entering another world that wasn't real, even if it was just in his head, was too much.

For Harukawa, she couldn't look at people the same way, her brain dividing them into chunks of blood and meat, places to stab and dismember. She had even announced that she couldn't be around other people anymore.

But here they both were, inching forward on their own paths.

And Momota was fine. Maybe when he got home from the cafe, he carefully toed his shoes off without touching them, threw the jacket he had only worn once since its last wash into a hamper, washed his hands until his skin wrinkled. Then he washed them one more time.

* * *

Momota's apartment is spotless. He managed to work up the courage to invite Saihara and Harukawa over once, and they were both visibly surprised. Harukawa commented that she had been expecting a pigsty, while Saihara delicately asked if Momota spent much time there, since it barely looked lived in.

He laughed and told them he'd always been a neat guy. As soon as the visit ended and the door clicked closed, he sprang to action. The deep clean lasted hours, and Momota muttered under his breath the whole time, "They didn't look sick," even as he disinfected every surface he had meticulously cataloged them touching.

Of course, Saihara and Harukawa weren't the only ones who needed support, and when Akamastu invited him to a get-together with all of their season's victims, he had to say yes.

Momota read her message, laid down with his phone close to his chest, and took several deep breaths, feeling the air move in and out his lungs with ease. He read it again. Everyone needed his help, and he kept breathing. In, out, no blood.

He read the message a third time and went through a mental checklist. He'll wear a windbreaker with long sleeves that dirt and grime will slide off of, he'll bring his backpack and stuff its pockets full of napkins and hand sanitizer.

He'll tell himself over and over that it's fine, everyone is healthy, and everyone needs his help.

* * *

At first glance, everyone seems fine. Maybe a bit quirky but as normal as anyone else. But as the conversations develop, each of them reveals some struggle. Iruma brags that she's totally fine even as she keeps touching her neck, running fingertips across the delicate skin of her throat every few minutes.

And Momota's here to help.

He asks Iruma if she's considered a scarf. She tosses her hair over her shoulder. "Why would I need something like that?" Then, hours later, she confides that stuff like that just makes it worse. "I feel shit against my throat and just start thinking that I can't fucking breathe, you know?"

Momota really, really knows, especially when she cackles and presses a kiss to his cheek. Momota manages to maintain his frozen smile for a strong five seconds before excusing himself and rushing to Akamatsu's bathroom where he rubs at his skin until his cheek turns red.

He breathes. Iruma isn't the most hygienic person in the world, but she isn't sick. But he imagines her touching him again, infecting him with her own inability to breathe. He splashes more water on his face, santizies his hands, opens the door, and screams when he walks straight into Ouma.

"Did Iruma-chan give you cooties?" Ouma asks while Momota presses a hand to his pounding heart. "Or an STD? By the way, do you know how rude it is to hog the only bathroom for twenty minutes at a party with sixteen people?"

"It wasn't that long," Momota says, though he isn't sure.

"Yup! It was longer actually! Nearly forty-five minutes." He holds up his wrist which has a chunky purple watch. "I timed you."

"That's weird, man."

Momota and Ouma's relationship is in purgatory. In the game, they had their one sparkling moment of clarity and understanding perfectly capped off with their deaths, neither needing to confront what they had confessed to one another.

But now here they were. In Akamatsu's bathroom doorway.

"I'm going back to the party," Momota says.

"Nooo, I just got you alone," Ouma whines. "Don't you want to say nice things to me, too? Give me a pep-talk, Momota-chan! I've been waiting all night!"

Despite their moment of clarity, Momota still has no idea when Ouma is truly being a jerk or not. Or maybe "jerk" is just the only way he knows how to communicate. "Okay? What do you want advice on?"

"You."

"Me?"

"You!" Ouma cheers. "What's up with you? Tell me about Momota-chan! No one else knows anything, so I want to know everything and hold it over them. Since you haven't told anyone anything, I'll feel really special if you confess even a tiny detail to me."

"What are you talking about? I've been sharing tons of stuff."

"Have you?"

"Yes?"

"Like what?"

Momota thinks. "Like… breathing techniques."

"Super personal. Very intimate. I know sooo much more about you now."

"Alright look, man," Momota says. "I know this is your thing—pushing people away, never saying what you really mean. But I'm here for you, okay?"

Ouma drops whatever act he had been putting on all at once, his previously animated posture reverting to stillness. "Thanks. But I want a friend who'll share their own secrets, too. It's pretty rude, you know—asking everyone else to be honest then running away when it's your turn."

Momota flinches as if Ouma slapped him and stumbles backwards when Ouma steps into his personal space. Momota hisses, "Get away from me." But his voice shakes and instead of coming off like a threat, he just sounds desperate, pleading even.

And Momota catches a glimpse of his face in the mirror and realizes that's exactly what's happening—he's begging. Because Ouma, in all of his barely five foot glory, is terrifying. Everyone is terrifying.

To his surprise, Ouma complies. "All you have to do, Momota-chan, is ask."

Ouma skips away, and Momota locks himself back in the bathroom to go back through his disinfecting routine. Ouma never touched him, but just the idea that he could have makes Momota's throat tighten.

* * *

The days go on. Then weeks. Then months.

Saihara is sleeping through the night. Harukawa has managed to join a gardening club and gets through meetings thinking about plants and not dismemberment.

Saihara told Momota over the phone that he's been talking with Amami, who also has trouble sleeping. "It's really nice," Saihara said. "Sometimes I'll call late at night or he will, and we'll just talk for hours to tire each other out."

Harukawa is less willing to divulge her additional sources of support but eventually confesses that she and Shinguji have been texting a lot, and while Momota can guess about what, she doesn't say anymore.

She does share that she and Hoshi send each other daily photos of cute things, which Momota teased her about. If they had the conversation in person, he knows she would have smacked him, but they haven't met in person in weeks because Momota can't leave his apartment.

His old strategies stopped working. Or more like, he slowly started feeling like he needed to do more. Hand washing became showers, clothes worn once outside need to be thoroughly washed, groceries that are now delivered to his door need to be disinfected, and touching the pre-disinfected groceries means he needs to wash his clothes and take a shower.

And Momota knows this is really, really bad, so he doesn't say anything. Not to Saihara or Harukawa or even Ouma who has consistently texted him everyday since their confrontation in the bathroom. Every text is near indecipherable Ouma-esque gibberish, of course.

Momota's so used to ignoring Ouma's messages that he almost ignores the one that says, "I'm outside, let me in."

Momota freezes. He hears a whine of, "Momota-chaaan," from the other side of his door. There is no time to prepare, to walk through his checklist, to breathe. Ouma rattles the door handle, and Momota visalizes it—his hands lathering the handle in germs. His tiny, blood covered hands, running through the blood from the arrow wound and the blood dribbling down Momota's chin, both of them bloody and sick and dying.

Momota rushes to his bathroom sink and spits up bile. He hears his phone ringing in the other room. Momota counts to ten and the phone starts ringing again after the first call goes unanswered. Before he can think it over, Momota marches towards his door and thrusts it open.

Ouma is on the other side, phone pressed to his ear. "I'll have to call you back, Momota-chan. I have a meeting with Momota-chan." Ouma pockets his phone. "You gonna let me in?"

Momota looks him over. He looks... fine. Like Ouma. Normal Ouma, not the sickly pale creature sweating bullets, covered in a mix of their blood.

But Momota can't actually make himself say yes, so he jerks himself back and leaves the door open with only a gruff, "Shoes off."

"Whatever you say, mom!" Ouma chirps.

Ouma hops on one foot, then the other to remove his shoes. He walks over to jump onto Momota's pristine couch. Momota makes a note to clean it. "So, how have you been on your lonesome? I know you must have missed my melodious voice."

Momota stands a few feet back. "You know. Busy."

"You don't like me being here."

It's not a question, so Momota doesn't answer it.

"But not just because it's me. You don't want anyone here."

Momota's impulse is to say no. But every nerve is already on edge being this close to another person after spending so long in blissful, safe isolation. He feels weak and raw, and a minute of silence crawls by. Then, he almost can't believe it when he mumbles the truth. "I don't want to get sick."

For all of his persistent pushing, Ouma seems genuinely shocked that he got an answer.

"You don't have to worry," Momota says. "Not like there's anything you or anyone can do."

Ouma pats the couch cushion next to him. "Sit. Or," he looks at an armchair a few feet away. "Maybe there. I promise I'm clean, though! Definitely not a lie! I totally remember when I last showered."

Momota grimaces, but sits in the armchair. "It's really nothing. I'm gonna get over this."

"So tell me about it. How you'll get better, how you're not better now, everything."

Momota levels one last glance to make sure it's not a trap, but Ouma is just meeting his gaze with his wide, clear eyes. No aggression, no traps, just sparking clarity.

So Momota talks. He talks about how he was dying in the game, how he still thinks he's dying, how dying is fucking terrifying, and it can happen at any time, so easily with just a cough to let him know it's started.

He talks and talks, and Ouma nods and hums and offers strange jokes that only Ouma understands.

When Momota's throat starts to hurt from talking so much, Ouma jumps up to get a glass of water for him. Momota winces at the idea of Ouma alone in his kitchen, touching everything, and when he comes back with a sloshing glass, Momota can't actually bring himself to drink from it, but Ouma accepts that, too.

"I promise I didn't poison it," Ouma says. "And I won't poison the next one either, promise."

Next time, Momota thinks. Ouma coming over for a next time, and it doesn't send quite as much fear down his spine as he thought it would. "As if you could get poison," Momota says. "Poison, though. You probably have a lot of thoughts about that, huh?"

Then, Ouma does the most surprising thing all visit. He looks away. "Not really. I don't dwell on these things. I'm a free spirit."

"Yeah?"

"Yup. Anyway!" Ouma bounces to his feet. "You know, I'm not good at feelings, so I don't know why you told me all of this. Maybe you should talk to someone else who won't get embarrassed hearing about all of your feelings. Just thinking about it makes me feel like I'm being crushed under a massive weight!"

There is a lot there that Momota should ask about, but Ouma dances out of his grasp. While Momota's stomach turns at the idea of touching another person, in that moment, he wishes that it didn't. That he could pull Ouma back and return whatever weird favor was being paid.

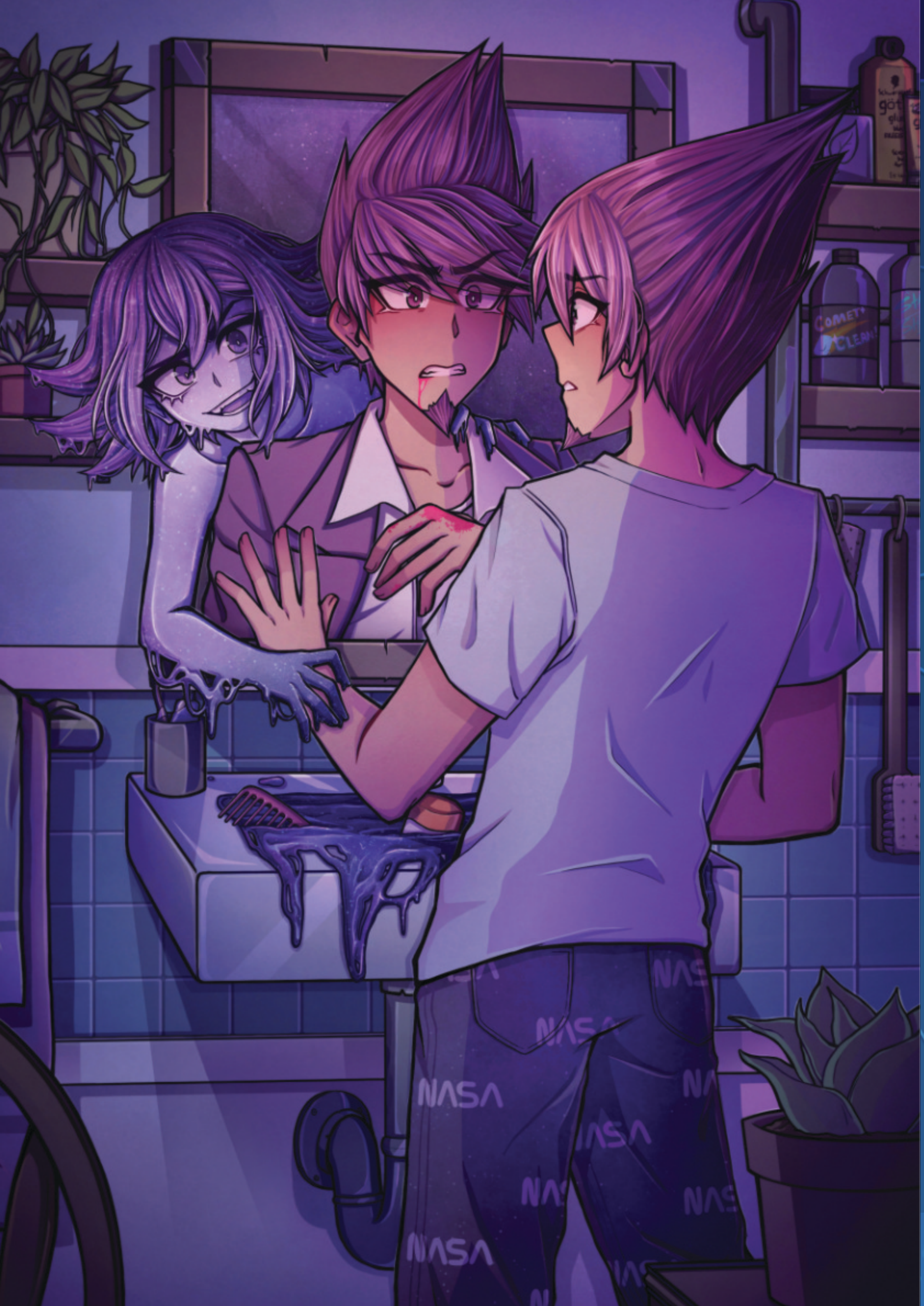
But this isn't a battle won in one day. Ouma skips out the door, happily announcing, "I also licked your doorknob, by the way."

"That's a lie."

"Ooh, but what if it wasn't?"

And the weird purgatory of this second life lingers, but there is a path and a partner out and into whatever comes next.

* * *



PRE-WRITTEN

by Dillas

Many things in life are certain. The sun rises in the morning. Growing older. Failures and successes.

Dying in a killing game violently, memorable and gone in an extravagant display of desperation.

Or so Kokichi believes until he opens his eyes and finds he can't close them. A red light flashes across the ceiling in a steady rhythm reminiscent of a heartbeat. Instinctively, he inhales only for his chest not to rise. Ah, so he's dead. He expected hell to be worse, but no complaints.

"Kokichi? It's Shuichi. Give me a sign that you hear me."

Shuichi? No. If hell is a real place, it can't be here, not if Shuichi ended up here. He's the only one that showed everyone kindness.

Kokichi taps a finger against the hardwood floor. His finger refuses to bend.

"Ah, good. Uncomfortable? I can sit you up.

A hand slides under his back and forces him into a sitting position. For the first time, Kokichi catches a glance of Shuichi. The detective appears older, bags heavy under his eyes and scruff hugging his jawline. Greasy hair is tied back in a low ponytail, barely hanging over his shoulder. Hard to tell with the red flickers, but Shuichi's skin appears paler than Kokichi remembers and barely stretches over his cheekbones.

Shuichi laughs softly as he scratches at the nape of his neck. "If I would've known that book would finally work, I would've cleaned up a bit. Sorry about that."

Book?

"Excuse me. Kaito's not awake yet. Let me just–

Kaito? Last he saw the astronaut was when they agreed to this crazy plan. So he bit the dust as well? Or maybe… Kokichi never died. In that case, what the hell is happening?

Kokichi's head would pound from all of this confusion, but he finds himself numb to it. No breathing. No pain. Movement is rigid. He can't even blink.

He glances down. Nothing out of the ordinary minus his scarf seems to be missing. Same clothes. Same hair. Same–

Bumps cover his hand. His fingers are misshapen from how he remembers them, especially his pointer finger, which is now longer than the others. When he wiggles his fingers, he finds out that they can't bend. He rubs his thumb against the side of his hand and feels nothing but a waxy texture.

Panic rises in his chest as he asks, "Shuichi, what did you do to me?"

The detective ignores him. Kokichi tracks him through the darkness to another corner of the room. From this distance, Kokichi makes out another body. Shuichi steps on papers, food wrappers, and unrecognizable objects to reach this person. He hooks his arms in their armpits and drags them over to Kokichi, each crunch of paper adding to Kokichi's already growing anxiety.

The flashing red light allows him to take in the features of the mystery person. His hands remind Kokichi of his own but much larger. His legs aren't quite the same length, the right just short enough to be noticed. The nose sits crooked as if he had been punched recently. Spiky purple hair falls a bit flat, the creator giving up from the difficulty of the project. Shuichi opens the man's purple glass eyes. Kokichi holds back from touching his own eyes to check if they're prosthetic.

Shuichi sits up what Kokichi believes to be a wax replica of Kaito Momota.

Kaito's eyes shift to Kokichi. What should have been malice in those eyes turns out to be emptiness, much like a mindless fish. The passionate Kaito had been snuffed into blank, cooling coals in what was once a raging fire. That scares Kokichi the most.

Yet… the faintest quiver of his eyebrows, the way the ends point toward the middle and down toward his nose in a slight scowl gives Kokichi hope that he may have an ally in this situation after all. Kaito is in there after all.

Kokichi lifts his hand up to motion for Kaito to calm down and listen for once. Kaito steals a glance at Shuichi, who settles back where he started by the window, then Kokichi, Shuichi once more, and finally settles on Kokichi again. Slowly, his pointer finger makes it to the pad of his thumb in a flat "okay" hand signal.

Shuichi perks an eyebrow at Kaito's hand. "Testing your movement?"

Kaito stays quiet. Good. Kokichi says, "I'd crack a joke or lie, but this isn't funny. What happened to us?"

Despite his rising anxiety, his voice remains steady. Is this a benefit of his heart not beating? He said he wouldn't lie, but now his body isn't a whistleblower anymore.

"Good to see you're as selfish as always." Shuichi sighs as he leans forward toward an open book above all the mess. "Didn't even ask about the others."

"The fact you're alive leads to a reasonable assumption," Kokichi fires back. "Some of you survived. Didn't think you wanted to go over the boring details, but eh. What do I know?"

That earns a slight smile. "It really is you in there. This wasn't for nothing. Kaito?"

Purple glass eyes roll toward Kokichi as if to ask permission to speak. Shuichi catches this and squints at the pair. Kaito says simply, “Shuichi, bro... I’m honored you used the Necronomicon on us, but at what cost? What did you do?”

Necronomicon? Ah, that book. Angie was stupid enough to believe that something like magic could bring dead people back, but Shuichi? The detective believes in logic and reason. He deconstructs issues to understand his pieces before he rebuilds them. This? No way.

Shuichi runs a scarred hand over the pages of the book in front of him. From this angle and poor, red lighting, the words blur, but he spies the outline of a body.

“It took weeks, you know.” Shuichi continues petting the book like a loyal pet. “Maki, Himiko, and I all three agreed to dig through the rubble of that school. We needed closure for what happened. You all needed closure.”

“Maki made it out?” clarifies Kaito.

If he has a stomach, guilt swirls in it as Kokichi recalls how he treated Himiko at the school. “Himiko...”

Shuichi hums. “Mhmm. Tsumugi didn’t tell us anything, and the outside world offered no answers. They kept saying to trust the story we lived, but we never got anything concrete! Just more questions! The only solution was to go back and find clues ourselves. So we moved piece after piece, and we came up short every time.”

Kokichi lifts a hand to point but finds only his shoulder moves as the rest of his arm stays in a straight line. “But you found the Necronomicon.”

“I found the Necronomicon.” Shuichi smirks as his gaze darkens. The flashing red light adds to the shadows crossing his face. “I figured... what Maki and Himiko don’t know won’t hurt them.”

A lightbulb goes off in Kokichi’s head. “You wanted to ask Tsumugi yourself.”

“I tried to resurrect her for about a month,” he admits. “Then I realized... She wouldn’t help me. Even when she was dying, she kept creating more questions. She’s not as popular, anyways.”

Kaito stares at the Necronomicon as if he can actually read the thing. “What does that mean?”

“Kaito.” Shuichi’s face softens. “You were always my favorite. I just... I was desperate for answers first. So I tried to bring back Tsumugi—”

Kokichi fakes a yawn. “Spare us the boring details of your ‘heroic’ escapade. You failed to bring her back. Now what? You brought back your bestie and your enemy? What do you want from us, huh?”

“Don’t,” warns Kaito.

“No.” Kokichi attempts to shake his head. “Don’t try to protect him. He keeps saying he wants answers. I’d say use your pea-sized brain, but we probably don’t have those anymore!”

“Kokichi—”

“Nuh uh! When has Shuichi ever made an emotional decision? He’s a thinker, and under the right circumstances, he could easily manipulate you. Have you been paying attention? He admitted to wanting to bring Tsumugi back to get answers. If she wouldn’t tell him anything before death, do you think she’d tell him after?”

Kaito stays silent.

Kokichi slams his wrist against his leg over and over until his wrist bends at an unnatural angle. He tears his gaze away before panic sets in. “Do you see how fucked up this is? He did this to us! He could melt us at any point!”

Shuichi slams the book shut, startling both boys. “He’s right. I was going to melt Tsumugi until she told me the truth. If she ended up melting completely, then... yeah. I did it to you, though, because it was the only way.”

Kaito raises a hand to run through his hair. Unable to do so, Kaito gasps, "fuck. Shuichi, dude, what the hell did you do?"

"I need to know what you know." Shuichi tightens his fists. He looks at Kokichi specifically. "You were always one step ahead of me. No matter what I did, you outwitted me. We were always at odds, but–"

"What makes you think I knew something, hm?" If he could, he'd raise an eyebrow. "Because I played games with you? Because I always had something to say?"

Shuichi squints. "You're doing it again. You say enough to keep me hooked, but I'm not playing these games anymore. You may be the writers' favorite, but not mine."

Kokichi huffs. "What do you want me to say? I found out everything? All so I can give you closure?"

The detective digs in his pocket for a lighter and flicks a flame to life. He points it toward Kokichi. If he could feel anything at all, maybe that would scare him.

"Make all of this worth it." Shuichi grips his chest. "Make everything we went through mean something. Make everything I've done for you two–"

Kaito bumps into Kokichi hard enough to almost knock him over. "He doesn't know anything. Leave him alone."

"Shut up, Kaito!" Kokichi bumps him back. "Let me handle this."

Shuichi points the flame at Kaito. "How are you so certain?"

"Only thing he knew was that we were being watched by an audience," continues Kaito. "That's why he was so concerned about being boring. We didn't know what it meant, but when Maki came and messed things up, Kokichi devised a 'showstopper' plan. If we broke the meta, it would end. Bro, the show went on, so I don't know what to tell you."

"But for what?!" Shuichi points between the two of them. His face grows unrecognizable in the blinking red light. "What did everyone die for?! For someone's entertainment? No one here has answers. It's like our story stagnated because the writer stopped."

Kaito manages to open his eyes wider. "What... what the hell does that mean?"

"People didn't like the ending, so the writer stopped." Using the lighter, Shuichi motions to Kokichi. "We weren't the ones people wanted to live, so the reader didn't care about what happened to us. No one's reading, so no one's writing this story."

Kokichi finds himself speechless. Almost. "They... they loved me?"

"They–" Shuichi points up as if someone is watching from above. "–love you. There's so many fake stories written about you out there for people to cope with. Do you know how much shit I got for how I treated you? I told their poor baby he'll be alone forever, and I was marked until the end. No one writes about me unless I'm paired with someone else. I want my own story, and this is it. I want the attention. This is my ending."

What kind of world did Shuichi, Maki, and Himiko return to where Shuichi copes by believing he's in some book where he's the main character? Why would any writer choose this dark route for their beloved characters?

"You two don't know anything? Fine. *Fine.*" Shuichi closes the lighter and opens the book. "I'll keep going until someone knows. This is my ending. I will win. I will learn why this happened. Death means nothing to me anymore. I'll bring back every last one of you if that's what it takes. Someone has to know. We weren't just entertainment for readers and viewers. We aren't characters in a story for people to rewrite. We–"

Kokichi and Kaito lock eyes in a silent exchange as Shuichi falls into a mumbled rant. In this state, they wouldn't stand a chance against Shuichi; however, if they go along with this madman, he'll keep bringing back the other Ultimates and eventually, they'll greatly outnumber him, right?

Kaito nods as if he agrees. Kokichi huffs. He never had the patience for a waiting game, but if the ending *he* chooses saves everyone this time, he'll do it. This is *his* ending.

The unlikely duo will work together once again to beat the odds.

Shuichi speaks up again, "I'll do Rantaro and Kaede next. Tsumugi silenced them for a reason. They… they must know something."

As if to feed his ego, Kaito adds, "yeah, bro, and if you show everyone you brought us all back, they'll love you again."

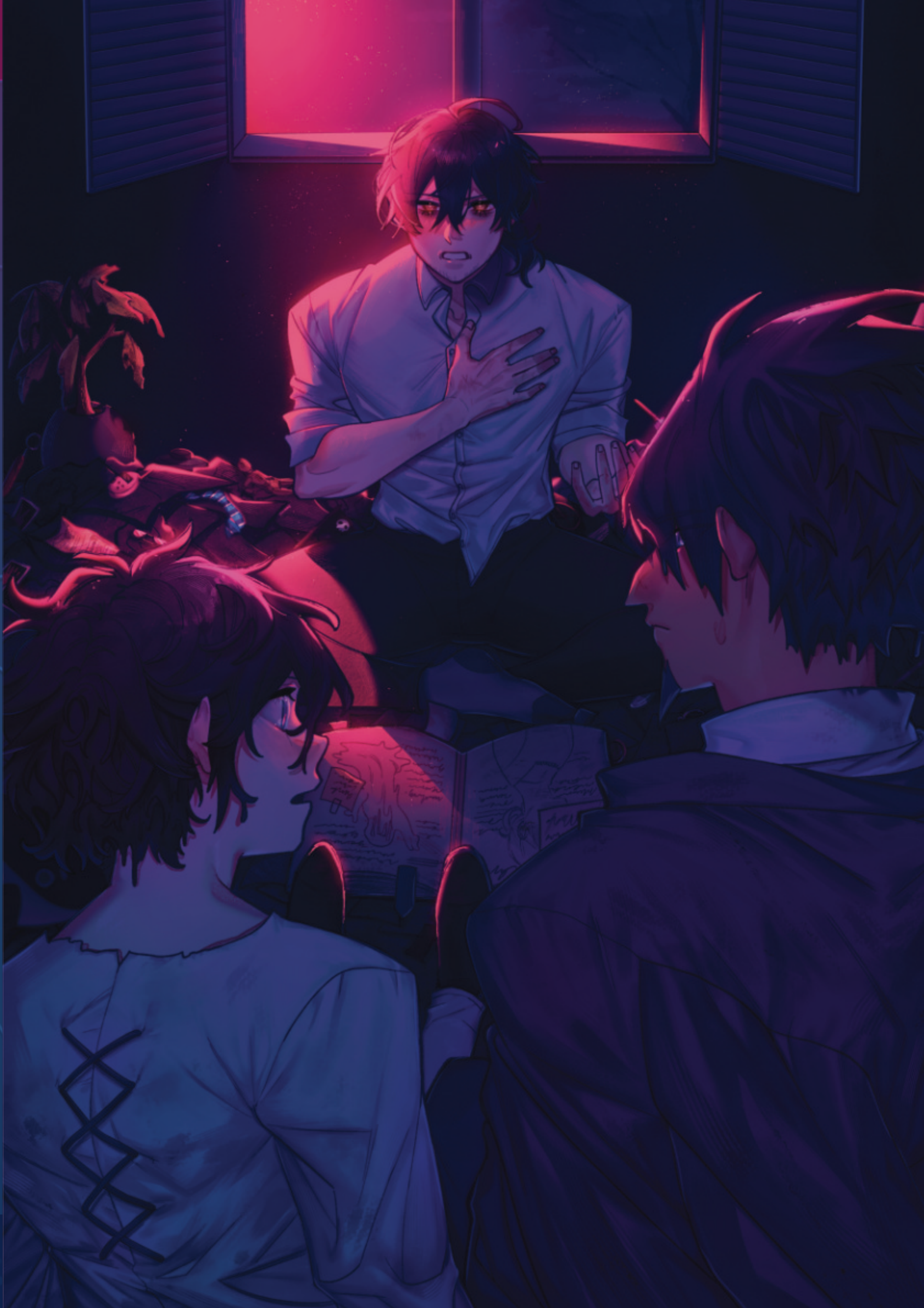
Shuichi's eyes widened. "Yes. *Yes*. And we can melt her in front of them. Then they'll really see us."

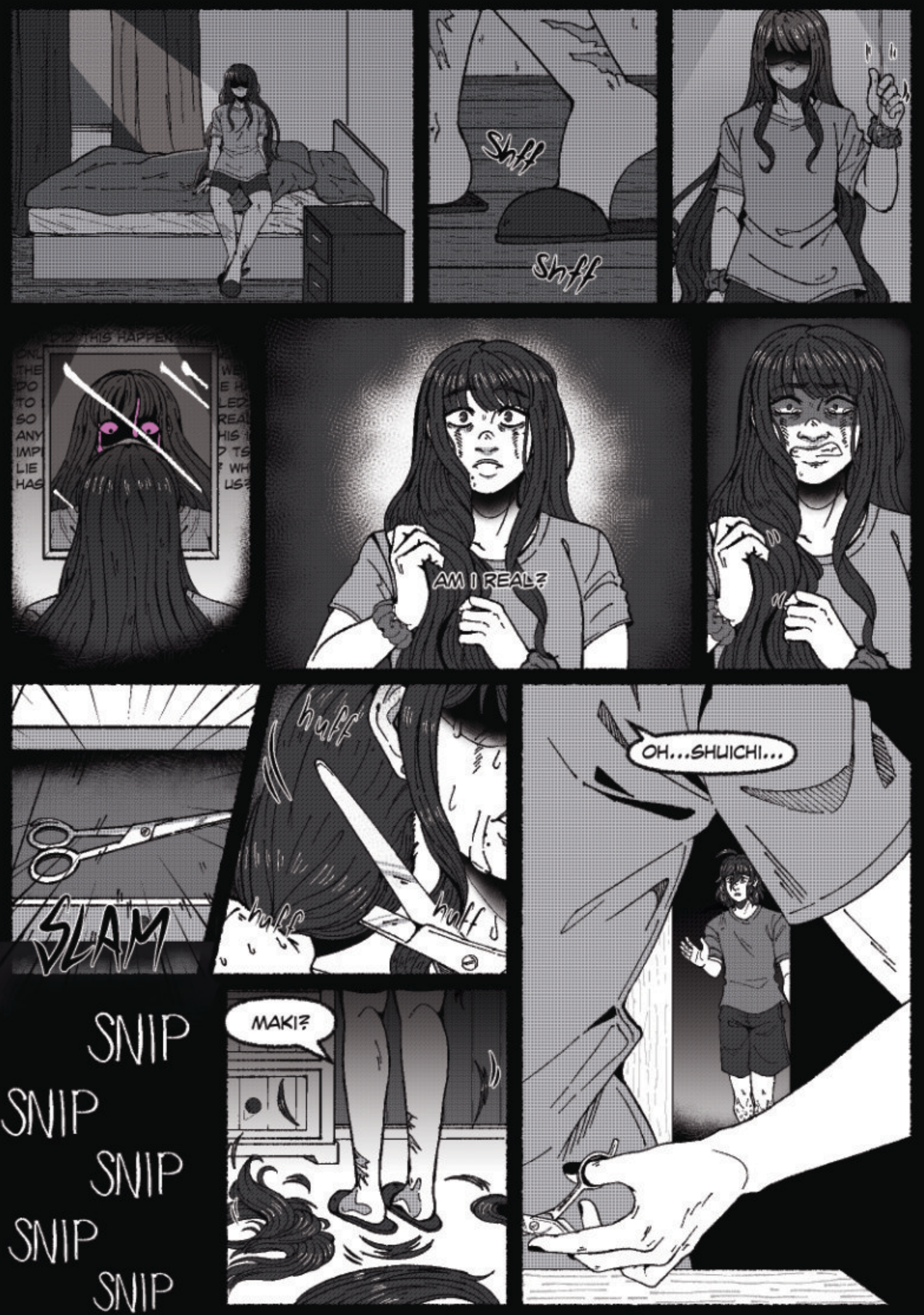
"Wait, I didn't say that." Kaito frowns.

Kokichi elbows him to remind him to go along with whatever shit Shuichi says for now. This isn't the Shuichi they knew anymore. The old Shuichi would find hope in any situation, but his apartment represents his current state. Papers recording his attempts to make this ritual work scatter everywhere. Items from the casino to remind him of the good times blend into the darkness.

A true prison full of failures and despair. Tsumugi would be proud of her handiwork with Shuichi.

* * *

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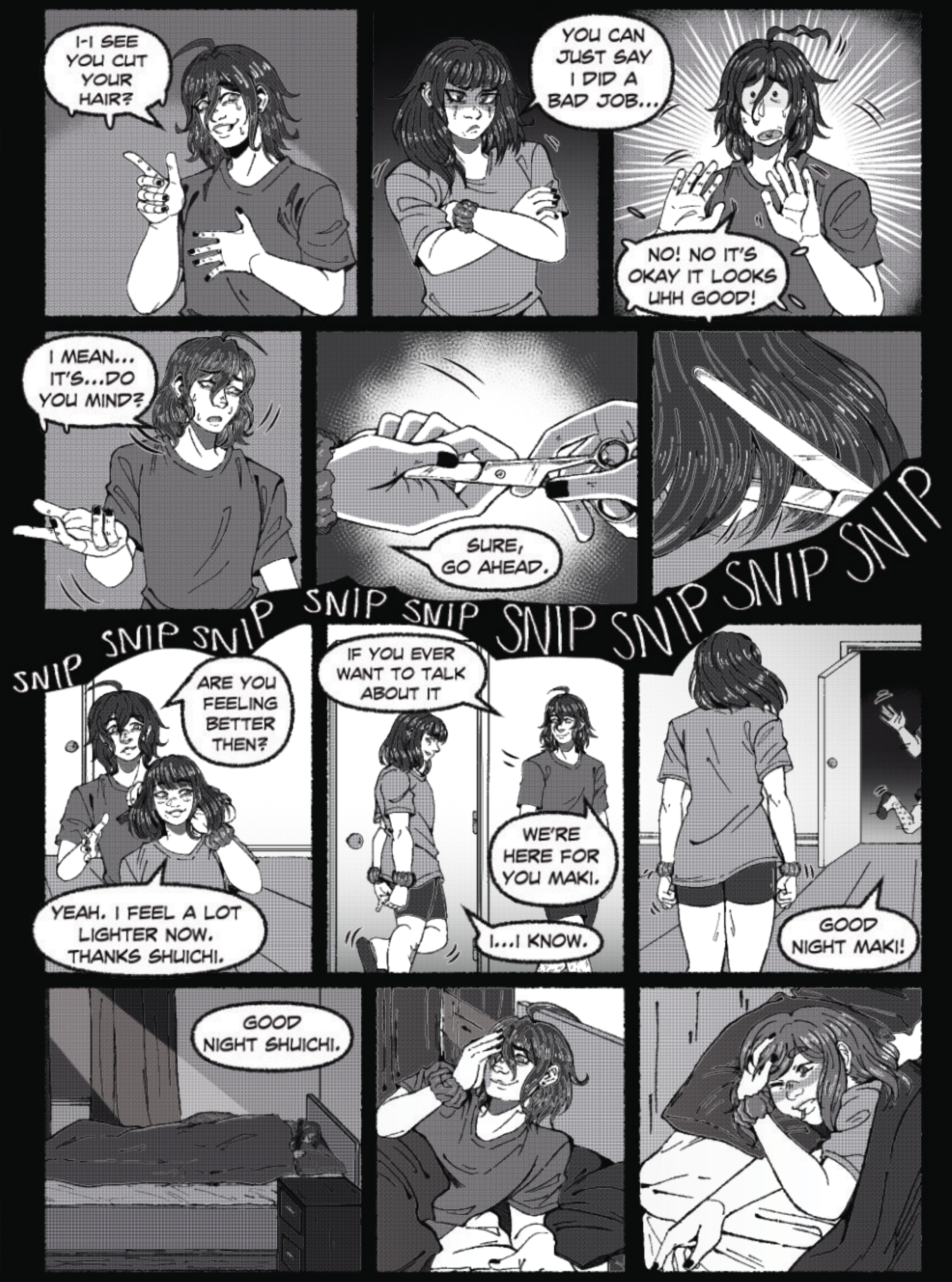
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YOU CAN JUST SAY I DID A BAD JOB...
NO! NO IT'S OKAY IT LOOKS UHH GOOD!
I MEAN... IT'S...DO YOU MIND?
SURE, GO AHEAD.
SNIP SNIP SNIP SNIP SNIP SNIP SNIP SNIP SNIP SNIP
ARE YOU FEELING BETTER THEN?
YEAH. I FEEL A LOT LIGHTER NOW. THANKS SHUICHI.
IF YOU EVER WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT
WE'RE HERE FOR YOU MAKI.
I...I KNOW.
GOOD NIGHT MAKI!
GOOD NIGHT SHUICHI.

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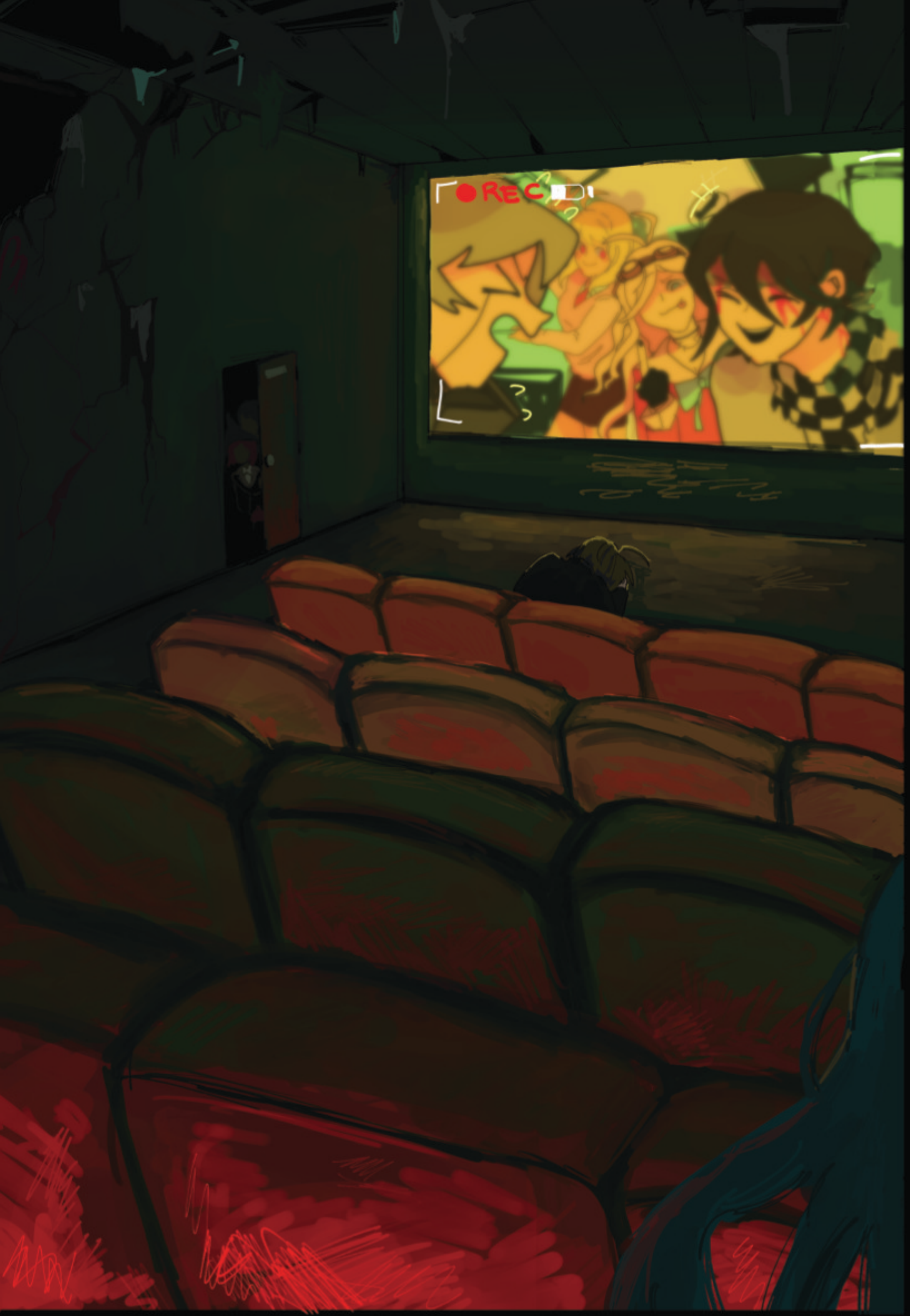


LETTING GO AND HOLDING TIGHT

by ToxicPineapple

Tenko's belongings from before Season 53 of *Danganronpa* consist of a school uniform, a phone with a sturdy green case, and a house key.

She receives her bundle at breakfast on the day they're to leave the *Team Danganronpa* facility. The staff went to the liberty of concealing them with brown construction paper and twine, but Tenko tears into the packaging right there at the table, stray bits of paper flying into her empty yogurt bowl.

The navy blue jacket, plaid skirt, and beige cardigan of the uniform smell like a past lifetime. It's neatly folded, but in Tenko's clumsy hands the jacket comes undone, spilling not only the skirt but the phone and key onto the dirty cafeteria floor. Perhaps it's a good thing that her phone is in such an expensive-looking case.

Tenko's hands tremble as she leans down to pick everything up, even though there's nothing sentimental about a school uniform, a phone, and a house key. The person who they belonged to doesn't even exist anymore—which isn't to say that Tenko doesn't remember *anything*. But the memories she has are distorted and vague, painful to recollect. Her doctor promised that her memories would return gradually, recommending that she visit places near her old home, or spend time with her family, as ways to jog her memory.

Frankly, Tenko isn't sure she *wants* to remember, but... she's never been the kind of person to run away from what's true. (At least, she thinks so.) It's terrifying to think that Master never existed and that all Tenko's memories are based in lies. But ignoring the facts isn't going to change them. Tenko just needs to face the truth head-on.

It's easier to cope with a distraction, though. Tenko puts the phone and key on the table and tries refolding the uniform. She can't manage to get it quite as pretty as it was before, though, and after her third attempt, she gives up and turns to her right. Kaede's lower lip is sucked between her teeth as she pores over a journal that she hadn't brought with her to breakfast.

"Is Akamatsu-san okay?" Tenko prompts, as lightly as she can. She hasn't watched the parts of the killing game from after she died—and the notion of doing so makes her stomach turn—but she's heard rumours about the person Kaede was before. Tenko struggles to reconcile the hateful and pessimistic girl described with the Kaede she knows, but she can only imagine how much harder it must be for Kaede herself.

Kaede shuts the book, smiling. "I'm fine. Thanks for worrying, Chabashira-san."

Her voice is even, if faint. Tenko knows she should advise Kaede not to repress, even if what she's repressing is painful, but something—maybe the Tenko from before—tells her that there's a time and a place for vulnerability. If Kaede broke down right now, could she put herself back together?

"I'm just..." Kaede continues. "It's like I'm reading a stranger's diary, you know? She's so... different."

"Yeah."

Tenko replies without thinking, then looks back at her own belongings; the uniform she used to wear, the phone she dropped, the key that unlocks a door she doesn't remember. She doesn't know if she would say that the her from before is as different as Kaede. But in order to say for sure, Tenko would have to know who that girl was, right? Like this, she's virtually a stranger. A distant relative living inside Tenko's own mind.

Thus, "Tenko understands. If Akamatsu-san needs any help processing it, or with anyone else... I'm here, okay?"

Kaede's smile finally touches her eyes. "Thank you, Chabashira-san. You're a good friend."

And while Tenko doesn't doubt Kaede's sincerity, she does have to wonder whether being a good friend too is a facet of the Tenko from before, and not the one she remembers being.

* * *

Tenko accepts *Team Danganronpa's* offer of a ride home despite being given the address of her former residence. She's probably the only one of her friends who does, even if the threat of Himiko's disdain is enough to keep anyone else from confirming it.

Regardless, Tenko understands. She feels nauseous around them too, difficult as it is to hate people who have been nothing but pleasant to her. But she can't risk going out in public alone until she can protect herself again—if she even could before—and contacting whoever is waiting for her at home, some faceless parent or guardian that she doesn't remember, is out of the question. So the black and white *Team Danganronpa* van with the tinted windows it is.

As Tenko leaves the vehicle, the driver reminds her of where to go, which she thanks them for, but as Tenko climbs the stairs, she finds her legs bringing her to the appropriate suite on auto-pilot. Her hand digs in her pocket and unlocks the door in one swift motion. Even the creak the door makes when it opens is achingly familiar, to the point where Tenko has to lean against the doorframe to catch her breath.

Footsteps thump from inside the apartment, steadily approaching the hallway. Before Tenko can react, an unruly head of dark brown hair flashes in her eyes and someone small crashes into her chest.

Instinctively, Tenko's hands fly around them, her heart giving a warm squeeze. The sudden surge of emotion is as terrifying as it is gratifying, but what's scarier is the face that greets her when they lift their head; while their eyes are the same green as Tenko's own, the person who tackled Tenko in an embrace just now is a *boy*.

Tenko rips away. The boy—her brother? Her cousin?—is unbothered. His grin, as boisterous as Tenko's, only widens.

"You're finally home!" The boy's voice is warm and excited, eyes alight, and he's young, an early middle schooler at best. He's all rounded features and earnest affectionate gestures; there's been no time for the mid-puberty ickiness that all boys go through to have settled in yet. Still, in every place he touched her, Tenko's skin tingles and crawls. Her limbs feel weak and cold and the longer she stands here watching this little boy who she can remember loving, the more blood drains from her face.

"I-I—"

"I watched everything!" the boy interrupts. "You looked so *cool* on TV—especially when you were flipping people! I *told you* they'd find a way to make you fight. It was *awesome*, but I'm glad you're home. I missed you so bad. Y'know Papa's at work right now? It's okay, 'cause he's leaving early today, but it's boring without you or him."

Tears prickle the corners of Tenko's eyes. Her ears are ringing, louder and louder and louder until her temples start to ache and she can barely hear what this boy—her *brother*—is saying. The excitement in his voice, his face, every inch of him, makes a part of Tenko want to break down and take him into her arms, hold him close and never let go ever again.

The rest of Tenko, the Tenko he saw on TV, is split between flipping him and clawing at her own skin. Tenko makes fists with both her hands and punches her head, jams her knuckles against her ears, as though to drown him out completely, as though he would disappear from her sight—from her heart—if she hits hard enough.

"Tenko has to—I have to go, I need—Tenko has to go."

She wants to tack on an apology at the end—to the universe, to her brother, to herself—but her legs are already moving without her, turning her around and sending her sprinting down the hall. Fast as she spun, though, she wasn't fast enough to miss the shock in her brother's eyes as she cut him off, and the way it turned into hurt as she retreated.

* * *

Tenko eventually reaches a café just blocks away from her apartment. Her heart begs her to keep running, but her legs ache and her gasps come in dry and short. She only woke up from the simulation a month ago, and she hasn't been to the gym even once since then. Pushing herself while she's still not at her best is the last thing her body needs.

Inside the shop, there are only a few customers, seated in the back. The barista's eyes go wide when they meet Tenko's, and for a moment Tenko wonders if she looks as panicked, deranged, and *disgusting* as she feels right now, but… no. The barista has a sticker on her travel mug. It's *Danganronpa*. Of course it's *Danganronpa*.

It occurs to Tenko as she approaches the counter that she can't buy anything. Her winnings from *Danganronpa*—as well as the payout they gave the Season 53 participants to prevent lawsuits, according to Maki—should be more than enough to cover a ¥500 coffee, but Tenko doesn't have any of that on hand. She barely has anything on hand, in fact, aside from the uniform, phone, and key.

Tenko is weighing her options, trying to decide whether or not it's right to sit somewhere without buying something first, when the door opens behind her, and someone says her name. Without thinking, she whirls around, assuming despite the lower register of the speaker that it's her brother here to reprimand her, but while the eyes she meets are green, they're a softer green, matcha green, and they hover above Tenko's eye level.

As soon as Tenko realises that it's just Rantaro, she relaxes, only to tense up again as shame and indignation fill her in equal measure.

"Amami-san?!" Tenko exclaims. "Did you follow Tenko here? I *knew* you were an untrustworthy degenerate!"

That makes Rantaro laugh—the *audacity*—as he shakes his head. "No, no! I didn't. Well… I sort of did. But I didn't follow you home. Please don't flip me," he adds, lifting his hands. Tenko, who had been gearing up to yell at him, deflates.

"Tenko won't flip you," she frowns. She takes a moment to scrutinise Rantaro's face, searching his eyes for malice. "Though you'd *deserve* it. What do you mean you *sort of* followed Tenko here?"

"Ah, well… I know it's awfully convenient, but I live in this area. I used to come here while I was waiting for Season 53 to get away from the empty house." Rantaro lets out a low, sad chuckle, but segues before Tenko can process it. "I was only a block away when I saw you run inside, and… I mean, forgive me for overstepping and all, but you look pretty distraught. I was worried."

If Rantaro is lying—which he still *could* be—it would be pretty easy to check. That's the only reason why Tenko decides to believe him. It isn't why she lets him buy her a drink, though; she wants to yell at him for even *daring* to suggest she accept the gifts of a male, but her brother's face flashes in her mind before she does, and her stomach gives a guilty squirm, and she shuts her mouth and nods.

Rantaro doesn't comment immediately, but Tenko knows he notices. She can feel his eyes on her while they wait for their drinks to be made, and then again as they're walking over to take a table by the window. Once they're seated, Tenko's skin crawls with so much apprehension she's half-certain she's about to attack him—but when he asks what happened, she ends up speaking instead.

"I have a little brother." The words come out flat. Tenko's hands curl around the base of her cup, shaking. "He hugged Tenko earlier, tight. He was so excited." And softer, "I'm terrified of him."

Expression neutral, Rantaro asks, "Why?"

Because he's male, Tenko thinks. *Because he'll suck my power right out of me like a vacuum cleaner. Because he's a degenerate and degenerates are disgusting, untrustworthy, disloyal, because, because, because…*

"Because I love him."

Tenko's voice comes out breathy and weak and pathetic. She releases her mug and drops her hands below the table, digging her nails into her palms.

"I remember him, and I… and I love him."

Silently, Rantaro ponders Tenko's words. The frown on his face, though mild, makes Tenko's stomach flutter anxiously. She fidgets in her seat while she waits, watching Rantaro drum a ringed finger against the table.

"Don't let him slip through your fingers, Chabashira-san," Rantaro finally says. "It's… hard, I know, to get past what the simulation made you believe. Every moment I spend at home still feels like a moment wasted, like I should be *out there*, looking for somebody, when they never even…"

Rantaro winces, suddenly, and takes a breath. When he speaks again, his voice is measured.

"If you really love your brother…" Rantaro's expression hardens. "Then take it from me. You need to do whatever it takes not to lose him."

Tenko should probably object to receiving advice from a boy. It goes against everything she knows to be here, after all, to sit so close to Rantaro and listen to him speak, like he isn't a danger to her, to her strength. But the melancholy in Rantaro's eyes and voice make Tenko ache, and if she has it in her to love a man, even if he is her little brother from before… maybe she can trust one, too.

* * *

Once back at her apartment, Tenko sees that her brother closed the door while she was gone. It would be bad if the door was left open, of course, but the sight of the closed door still lodges a brick in her chest.

"Amami-san," Tenko whispers. "What if Tenko can't do it? What if I make him hate me?"

"If you talk like that, it'll happen," Rantaro frowns. His hand rests itself on Tenko's shoulder, maybe just on instinct, but even when he squeezes, Tenko doesn't pull away. "You just have to find out for yourself, Chabashira-san."

"And you'll… stay right here?"

"Of course."

With one last look at Rantaro, Tenko retrieves her key for the second time today and steps forward, breathing in before unlocking the door. This time, when she opens it, there are no approaching footsteps, just a dark house and a heavy, pervasive silence.

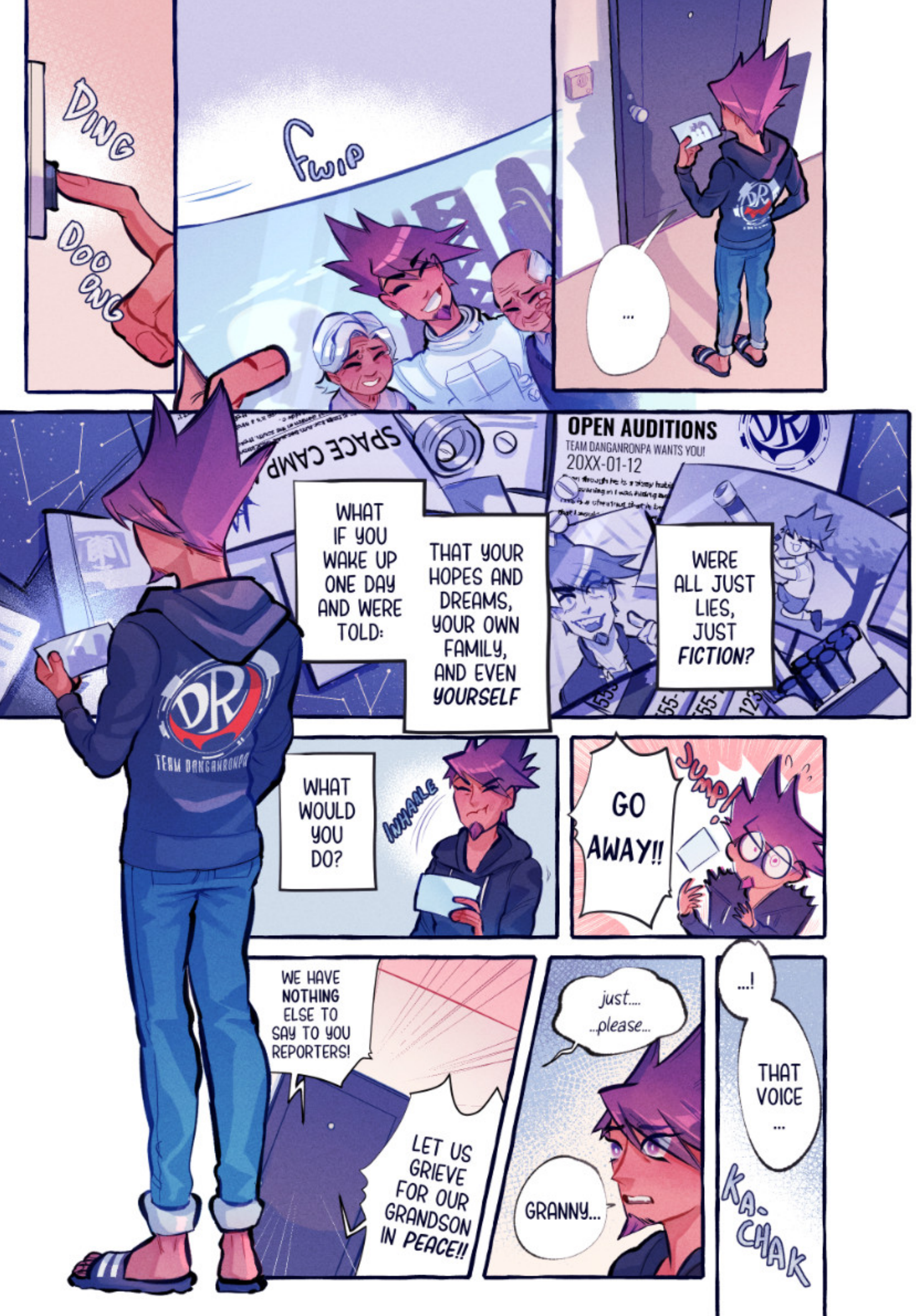
Still, she enters without looking back. "Hayate? Tenko's—I'm back."

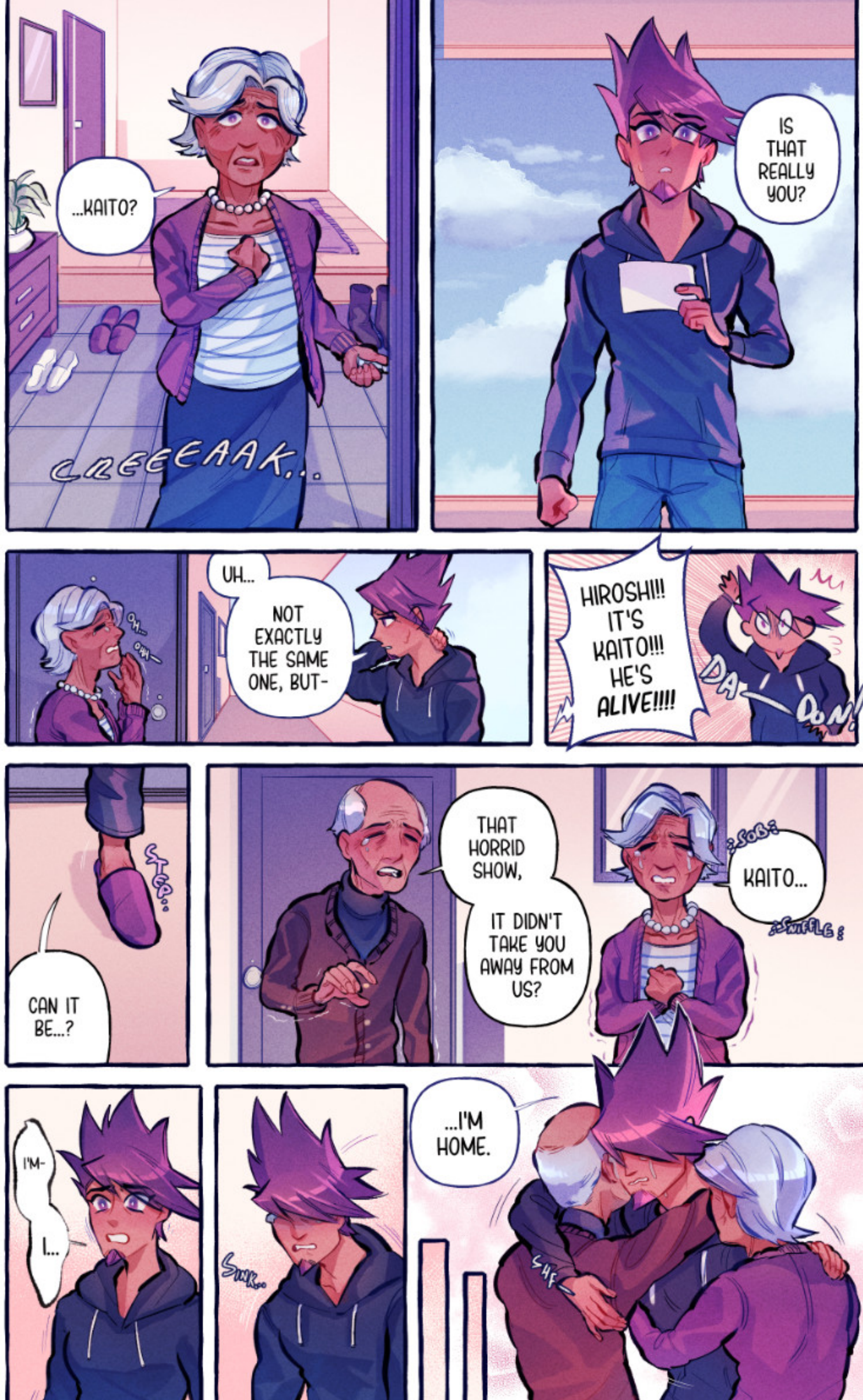
Time stands still. Tenko counts her heart beats while she waits, a nervous warmth rising in her throat. *One, two, three, four, five…*

Then, that same head of unruly brown hair pokes its way around the corner, a pair of green eyes widening and sparkling hopefully. "Tenko?"

Tenko can't ignore all her fake memories, can't begin to sort between fiction and reality—and in truth, she's not sure if she even wants to. Yet somehow, *somehow*, hearing her brother's voice and welling with warmth as she did before… Tenko can't help believing that they're going to be just fine.

* * *


Ding
Doo ong
fwip
...
SPACE CAMP
OPEN AUDITIONS
TEAM DANGANRONPA WANTS YOU!
20XX-01-12
WHAT IF YOU WAKE UP ONE DAY AND WERE TOLD:
THAT YOUR HOPES AND DREAMS, YOUR OWN FAMILY, AND EVEN *YOURSELF*
WERE ALL JUST LIES, JUST *FICTION?*
DR
TEAM DANGANRONPA
WHAT WOULD YOU DO?
INHAALE
GO AWAY!!
JUMP!
WE HAVE **NOTHING** ELSE TO SAY TO YOU REPORTERS!
LET US GRIEVE FOR OUR GRANDSON IN *PEACE!!*
just.... ...please...
GRANNY...
...!
THAT VOICE ...
KA-CHAK


...KAITO?
CREEEAAK...
IS THAT REALLY YOU?
oh... oh...
UH...
NOT EXACTLY THE SAME ONE, BUT-
HIROSHI!!! IT'S KAITO!!! HE'S *ALIVE!!!!*
DA-DON!
STEP...
CAN IT BE...?
THAT HORRID SHOW,
IT DIDN'T TAKE YOU AWAY FROM US?
:SOB:
KAITO...
:SNIFFLE:
I'M-
I...
SINK...
...I'M HOME.
SHF

coexistence

by wrenkos

To wake from a dream always leaves a brief period of incoherency.

The beep of something faint in the distance blends into the sounds of an air conditioner he doesn't remember setting. Korekiyo Shinguuji wakes up in a room he recognizes, but not quite. To the right of him is a window, but sunlight is somehow too much to handle. How long has he been asleep to feel so groggy?

Like a newborn deer unused to his own body, shaky limbs push him up off the mattress he lies upon. There is a railing to the side—has that always been there?—attached to the framework, and hands that should really not be so sweaty reach and take hold.

With another grunt of effort he pushes himself up once more. Up he rises, off to the ground with a stumble in his footwork. There is a nightstand with a logo that looks familiar, and he has a feeling he has not fully understood the situation he's found himself in. His body moves like it is not his; he needs to get up before the strike of a morning announcement and prepare makeup and—

Who is Team Danganronpa?

Korekiyo pauses as he peers at the logo closer. And, in a single, horrifying moment, he remembers it all.

First comes the stunned silence, then comes the nausea. Memories that feel fuzzy yet clear flood back to him too fast for him to count. One after the other and the other and *the other*. In one life he is an only child, honor student, he who signed up to throw his life away, and in another life he remembers he killed one, two, no—*more than that*, and in that life he was something he should not have been, and in that life he—

"What?"

He does not want this person's memories, he realizes, because there is a scream at the back of his throat for what he is remembering and there is a burning flickering flame when he remembers and before he realizes what he is doing a lamp has been thrown across the room with his own two hands. There is movement outside the door and there are voices he does not want to hear when it flies open, because they are not loud enough to drown out the sounds of his own horror, because, because, because—

"What did you *do* to me—?!"

Because he is disgusted with what he was written to become.

* * *

Needless to say, Korekiyo does not cope well. Not to say that others are, either, considering it was all very real for those who died and killed and stood to watch it happen. It was a simulation—not like that took away from the horror of it all. When someone overwrites your entire personality and gives you a backstory like *that*, he knows it is something that will haunt him for the rest of his life. Yet he feels—knows— that others are coping better than he is.

He sees the way the others look at him, and he does his best to avoid their gazes. It's not like he can blame any of them for not wanting to look him in the eye, after all. He is—was?—him, Ultimate Anthropologist or whatever they decided on. Korekiyo, too, hates who he was made to become.

He does not get many visitors, and to nobody's surprise, Yonaga, Chabashira, and Yumeno do not even cast him a glance. The first week he is met with awkward stares from the others, pitying looks, and some recoil when he straightens himself out. Ouma makes a jab at him. He pretends not to hear it. The second week passes, then the third, and he wonders if this will be the rest of his life: pretending not to be there, for being present is much more offensive.

Damn *Team Danganronpa* into Hell, and if he finds that writer who decided to write this bullshit he'd kill someone—for real this time. He had signed up because he was a nobody, but this really was *not* the person he was meant to be.

So he avoids everyone else the same way they avoid him. Zombie-like shuffles bring him to the communal kitchen (*whose great idea in Team Danganronpa was to make them live in the same buildings after they were done tearing at each other's throats?*) and to his surprise there is somebody else here at three in the morning.

He should leave. He turns, his stomach rumbles, and all grace is ruined when he meets the eye of Kirumi Toujou, who has that same deadpan expression as she always did. Dishrag in hand, it appears he has interrupted time for cleaning.

"Shinguuji-san," she greets, and then says no further. Her eyes drop down to the table before her, and, like she is deeming him too insignificant of a bug to be dealt with, she continues with her task.

"Toujou-san," he responds, tensely. He makes his way over to one of the cabinets and grabs the first thing he sees. Cereal. Unfortunately this requires getting a bowl and milk, because he's not an animal, and he realizes that means he'll have to make more noise and make this more awkward, but it's too late to put it back in the cabinet. He stands, still, for a second, stupid, with the cereal box in his hands.

Unfortunately, Kirumi does not ignore his idiocy. "There's milk in the fridge."

"O—" He accepts his fate and moves to get the required materials to eat the plainest cereal in the world. "Okay."

"It'll be to the left, besides the orange juice."

"Alright."

He follows her instructions, prepares his cereal, and eats standing. An even more awkward silence follows. Korekiyo takes off his mask. He chews. He swallows. In the 5 minutes it has taken to prepare his "meal", Kirumi has finished cleaning. When she moves to the fridge and walks past him, for a fleeting second Korekiyo is terrified the woman is going to kill him. (He wouldn't blame her.)

Instead he watches as she opens the freezer, pulls out a tub of ice cream, takes a spoon out of who knows where in one of those pockets of hers, opens the lid with surprising delicacy, and then she stabs downwards like it is the head of a Team Danganronpa executive.

He winces and looks away.

"You always do that," she says, shutting the freezer door.

"I'm sorry?"

"You're always looking away from people," she muses around a scoop of ice cream, "is it because you don't want to offend them?"

"I, um." He blinks. "...I suppose."

"You're not agreeing with me. You don't want to offend me, either." Another jab at the ice cream. (Did she need to be so violent?) "I don't care. It sucks what we did to us. The other day when Ouma-san said that he didn't want to associate with serial killers was rude of him. Momota-san didn't need to say that you gave him the chills, or—what was it that he said?"

"It's fine, really..."

Thunk goes the spoon in that poor ice cream, and he resists the urge to flinch. "You," and he hopes this will change the subject, "You—you seem really mad about that ice cream. Did it offend... you?"

"It did."

"...Um."

"Shinguuji-san," slowly, she turns to face him, and now he realizes Kirumi usually had both her eyes covered—now both are shown to the world, he realized green eyes tend to a fire that was not there before. "I am mad. I am, if you will excuse my language, *pissed*, unbelievably fucking so."

"Oh."

"I'm mad. How could I not be? They—" she waves her spoon around, "They made me think I was in charge of an entire country. I'm just some teenager. Just a *teenager*. But now I wake up and I think, if I'm not working for someone else, for something that isn't me, then I'm as good as nothing."

"I—"

"I'm mad at you too. Aren't you mad? You act so demure. I heard you threw a lamp your first day, so you're not an idiot. You're just going to take what you get? Everyone else looks at you like you're a plague to society or *whatever*, when we're all in the same boat. Even people who have also killed others suddenly decide they're better than you."

"I'm not mad."

Kirumi stares at him, looks him up and down. He knows he's lying, and he knows he's bad at it, but he hopes she'll accept it, and...

"You're lying."

An extended period of silence follows. There is a churning in his gut.

"…Maybe I am, then."

"So you're aware of it." Kirumi looks off at the distance, and he knows he is. "Good."

* * *

From that point forward, the two stick together. He supposes it makes sense. Victims will want to avoid killers. Kaede killed selflessly, Gonta was forced to do it, and Kaito is everyone's favorite. That leaves just one more—and she is brash enough to drag him around when he hasn't got enough sunlight. She's a lot more intense than she was in the game, but he supposes he's a lot more soft.

The smell of nail polish fills the air. The two sit in Kirumi's room. Korekiyo has his head in some magazine he isn't reading, one hand outstretched as the (not quite) Ultimate Maid paints his nails black. It has been weeks since their first interaction, and he is beginning to think maybe the two are getting along. Hopefully. Probably.

He isn't sure. There is an air to both of them: Kirumi is polite, but there is an anger to her that people avoid, and Korekiyo is Korekiyo. The two are outcasts, but it's not like they were Tsumugi Shirogane, whose name was said with enough loathing by a certain blue-haired "hero" that Kirumi had to remind him that she, too, was rewritten to be who she is. (Actually, that's probably why they're being avoided.) Misery loves company, and…

"Are we friends?" he blurts out, looking over.

"You've never had friends before, have you." comes her response, before she pauses. "… We… are, aren't we?"

"We are?"

"We are."

That settles that.

* * *

Another week passes. Kirumi scolds him for letting the nail polish crack off, and the two agree to reapply it some other time. Today, it is Korekiyo's turn to braid Kirumi's hair, as it is much longer than what it was in the game. His work is much more clumsier than he hopes, but he does it anyway.

Friendship, or something. As he remembers under, over, under, over—was that under, or over, or…? *Whatever*, Kirumi breaks the silence.

"Do you talk?"

"Um?"

She frowns, before sighing, "…let me rephrase. Do you. Talk? To Yonaga-san and Chabashira-san?"

"Oh." He blinks. Her hair slips from his grasp. "No, I, um. I don't. Why do you ask?"

"I heard Gokuhara-san and Iruma-san are talking about things," through the mirror before them he can see her shut her eyes, "…Momota-san and Ouma-san seem to get along fine, too."

"I saw Akamatsu-san and Amami-kun painting a mural on one of the walls the other day."

"Right." she sighs. "…there's that, too. I don't. I haven't talked to Hoshi-san. So I guess it's the both of us left, then."

"Probably." there is a beat of silence. "…It's hard to know what to talk about. I think Yumeno-san would have my head if I said something to offend either of them, so I haven't even seen them around…"

"Mm. I guess it's—I should…" another sigh, another pause, heavier this time. "I should talk to him."

"…You should."

"The pot calls the kettle back, you hypocrite." She shuts her eyes, and for a while, Korekiyo doesn't say anything in response.

"You could write? Ah… write letters, I mean. I haven't done it myself, but. You could."

"I could."

They drop the subject.

* * *

The next day Kirumi drops stationary into his hands. Some are cat themed, most are not, and it takes a second of him staring blankly at her before he remembers.

"Are we actually going to write?"

"It's better than saying it out loud," she taps her notebook, before pausing, "…though it's no easier to put things into words."

"Hm."

The two sit in silence as he reaches for a pen and paper. His handwriting is messy, uncoordinated—but it's his, and he's sure the 'him' in the simulation would have the fanciest writing around. But he has never been good with words, unless words were written into him, and even though this was technically his idea he can feel the pen heavy in his hands.

"It's hard," he says, eventually, and glances up to see Kirumi's furrowed brow.

"It is," she says, but doesn't put her pen down. He would never have expected for her to be stubborn, but, then again, he would never have expected for them to actually get along. "…It's better than speaking, though, right?"

"Probably."

"Probably," she agrees, tapping her pen onto the paper. "Do you think Momota-san and Gokuhara-san and Akamatsu-san all wrote before speaking?"

"Momota-san doesn't seem like he'd think all his words through. He speaks from the heart…"

Kirumi laughs. Korekiyo smiles.

* * *

A week passes. The words come to him slowly, only when he forces himself to write. His fingers dig deep into the two letters he holds, deep enough that he realizes they might break under the pressure. *There's that feeling again.* The very idea of confrontation makes him want to break free and run away—that's probably why his knees are weak, that's probably why his heart feels like it might leap out of his throat. (Again.)

But—

but.

It's unfair, isn't it? It's unfair to not talk to Angie, it's unfair to not talk to Tenko. At the very least it's up to them if they want to turn this into a (one-sided) screaming match.

Hopefully that wouldn't be the case. Kirumi's confrontation earlier on in the day went relatively well, after all, and she was so stressed about it she had nearly backed out entirely. But it was, perhaps, a bit too hopeful to assume that it would go the same here.

Was he being too hard on himself, though? Sometimes it was hard to tell, and sometimes, he didn't know what he did and didn't deserve, and…

"I'll be right behind you," Kirumi says, and pats him on the back.

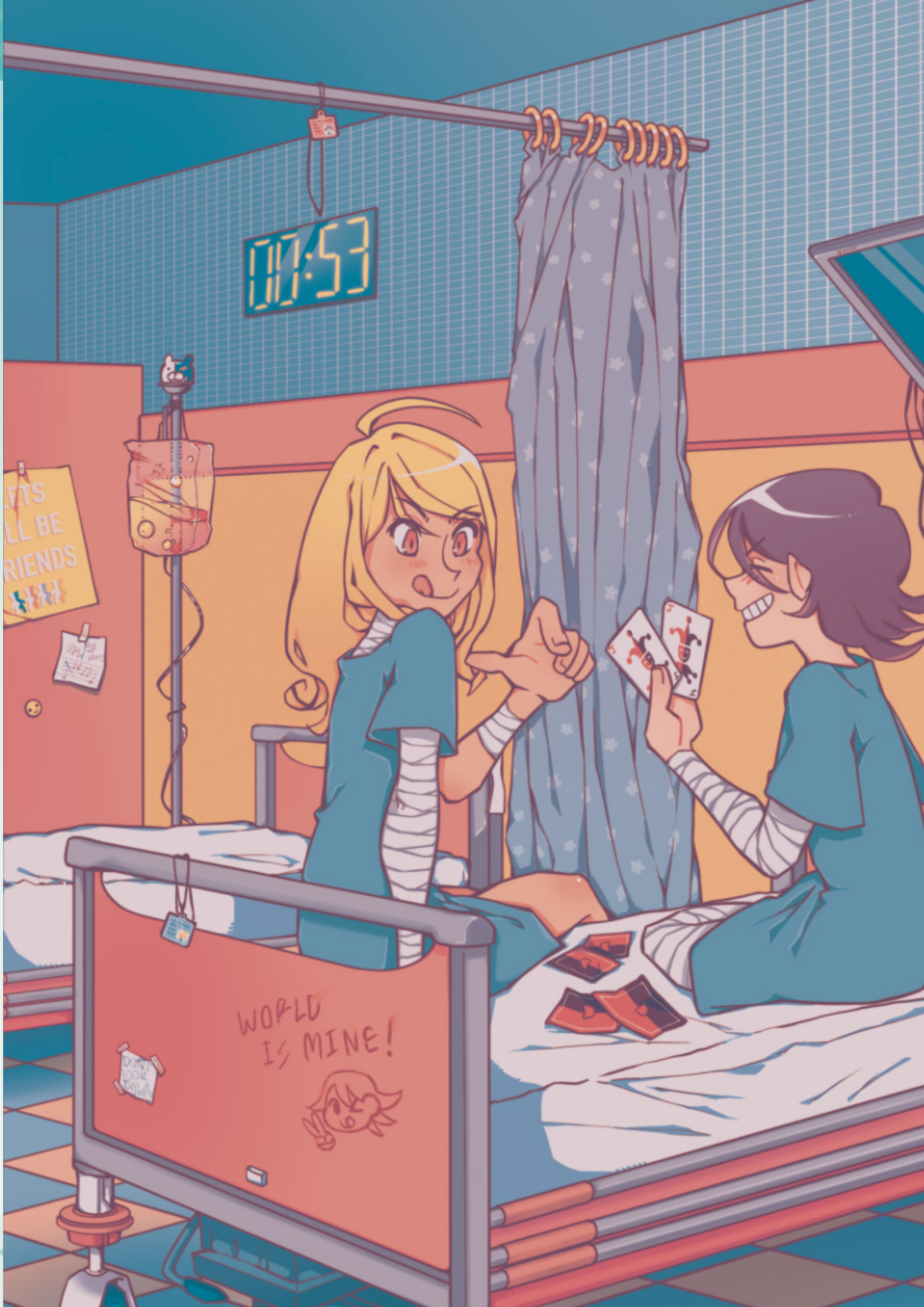
And maybe forgiveness was more than he deserved. But if they were willing to listen, he was willing to talk.

He was willing to be friends, if they would be. Maybe that's too lofty of a dream, but what was wrong with that? Everything since he had woken up had been a nightmare. Maybe—maybe, *maybe*, they could feel the same.

He could hope.

Shaky hands reach to knock on the door before him.

* * *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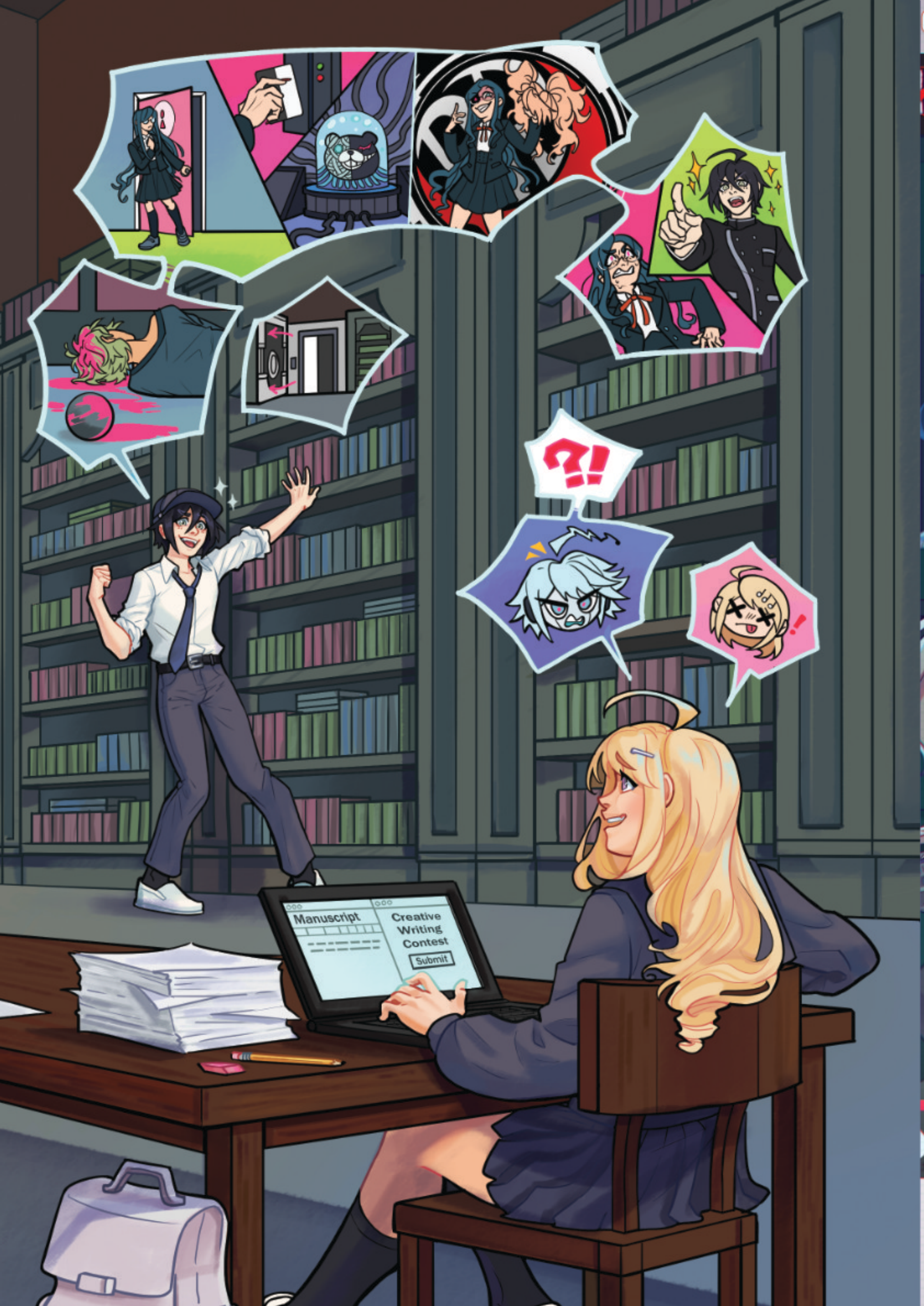
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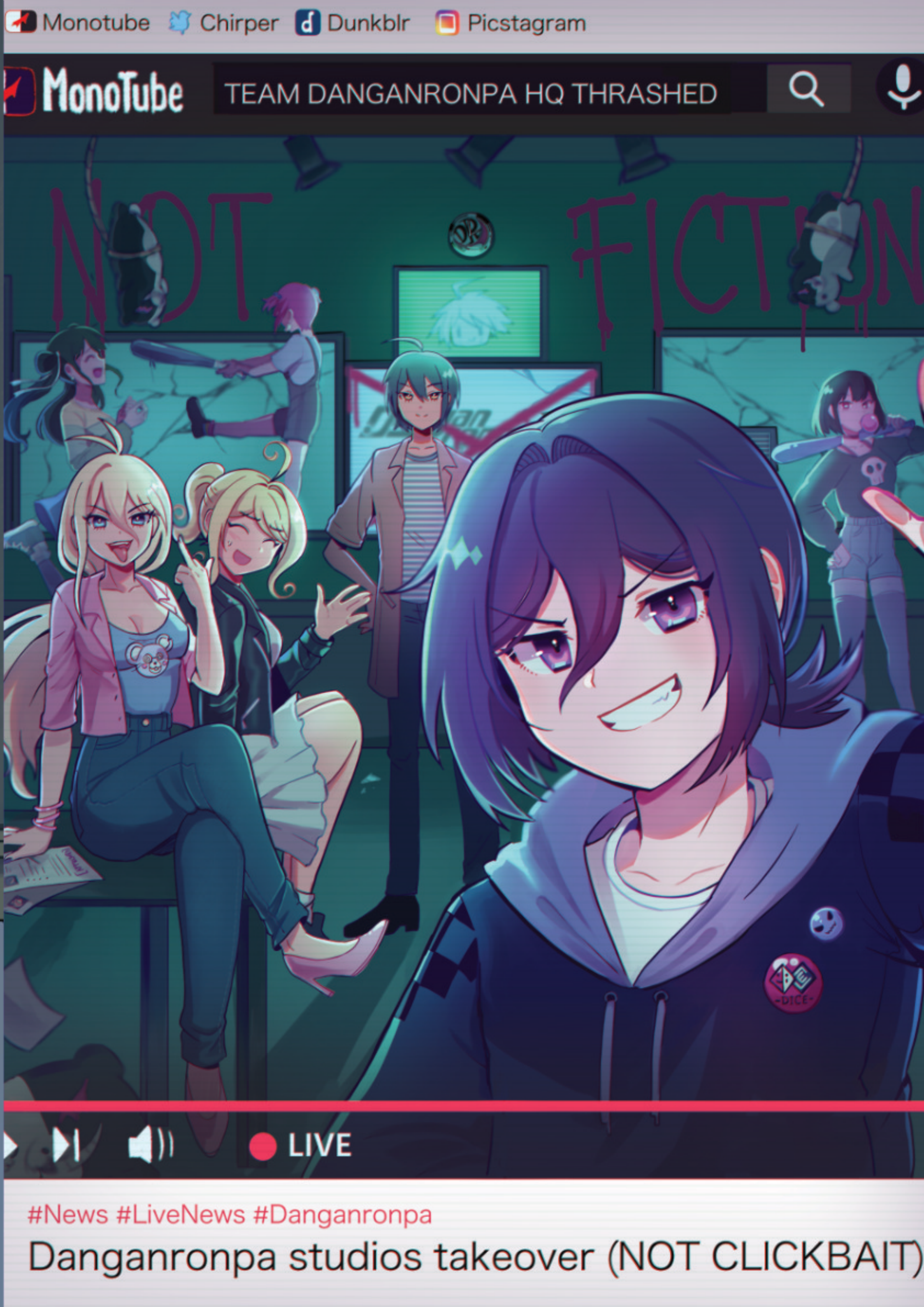
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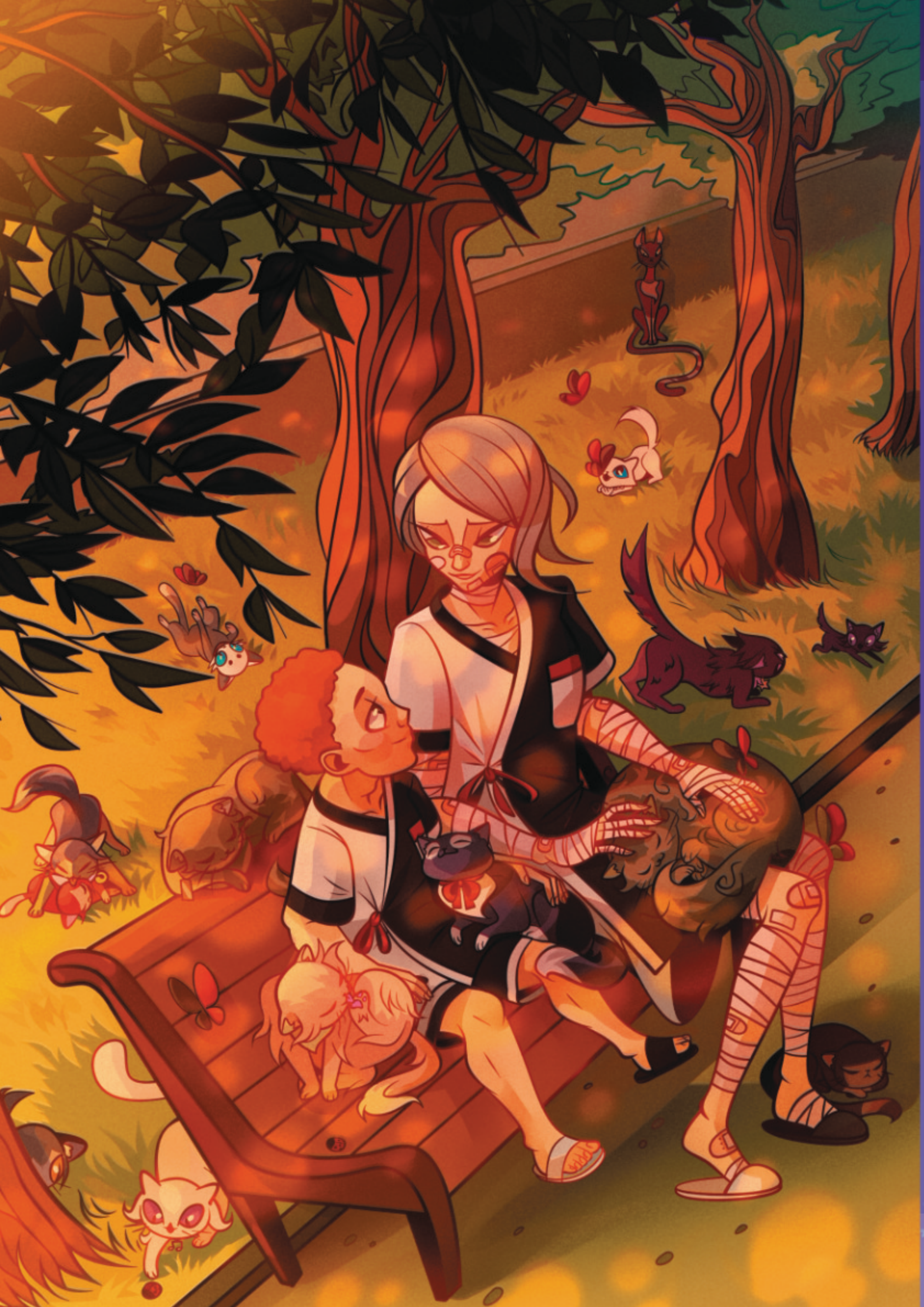


Kabocha

by serenescribe

There's a cat living in the alleyway.

Ryoma first encounters it shortly after moving into his new apartment, a high-pitched mewl snapping him out of his thoughts on his way to the grocery store. It takes him a good five minutes of searching, but he eventually finds a scrawny calico hiding underneath some cardboard, staring at Ryoma before yelling loudly.

All he can do is stare back.

So maybe he ends up buying some tuna at the store to feed it, chest light as he watches the cat gobble down the meal. Maybe Ryoma starts a habit of putting aside pocket change to feed the stray, nicknaming it *Kabocha* because he feels weird calling it the cat. Maybe he's grown *attached*.

It doesn't mean he intends to adopt Kabocha. Not then, and not now either.

Sure, he loves cats, but whenever he considers bringing Kabocha home, the thought is squashed by an anvil of self-doubt. What if he's a bad owner, or doesn't know how to care for a cat? Ryoma's only ever had one pet before, and even then, it hadn't actually existed. Technically, he's never even been a cat owner.

The arrangement they have works because Ryoma isn't ready, and he doubts he'll ever be. For now, Kabocha is nothing more than a welcome distraction, a reprieve from his inner demons for as long as he feeds it, stroking its fur as it purrs headily.

That is, until Ryoma wakes to a thunderstorm in the middle of June.

* * *

He's dreaming again.

A pair of hands shove him into watery depths, the weight of the waves pulling him to his grave. His mouth permanently contorts into a scream, and he can see shadows approaching, sharp teeth glinting in the dim light.

He drowns alone, limbs bound, unable to muster more than a garbled yell as piranhas rip him to shreds. Their jaws sink through his flesh, his bones, and there's water flooding his mouth; there's blood – his blood – staining the water red, and he's squirming, trying to escape, and–

BOOM.

Ryoma startles awake with a gasp.

The sound of rain grounds him as he clutches his chest, reeling from the aftermath of his dream. Eventually, Ryoma sighs. "Just another nightmare," he murmurs, but his shaky voice fools nobody, least of all himself.

Outside, the rain pours. There's another clap of thunder as he changes his clothes. Thunderstorms – actual thunderstorms – are rare enough that they scare grown adults, but Ryoma finds that he doesn't mind the loud crashes and rumbles.

It's not until he's pouring a cup of water that he remembers something.

The cup clatters to the floor, water spilling everywhere.

"Kabocha," Ryoma whispers, brain whirring as he realises just what he'd forgotten.

Cats hate water. But there's been many rainy days since he first met Kabocha, and each time, the calico was fine. No, it's the *thunder* that's new.

Japan is no stranger to torrential rainfall, but thunderstorms?

A tiny voice in Ryoma's head reminds him that cats have exceptionally good hearing, and the storm is freakishly loud.

Another clap of thunder echoes through the room as Ryoma heads for the front door.

* * *

"Kabocha?" he calls as he steps into the alleyway, voice quickly drowned out by the downpour. The rain soaks his clothes as he moves around, searching every nook and cranny. Maybe he should've brought an umbrella, but he's not sure where he left it. *Probably somewhere on the floor*, he thinks.

He rummages through trash cans, shoves boxes aside, but it isn't until he's inspecting the AC condensers that he hears it.

There.

In the midst of the pouring rain, thunder echoing from afar, Ryoma hears a tiny little mewl.

In a flash, he's racing towards the source – a stack of soaked boxes in the corner of the alleyway. The storm isn't letting up, but Ryoma isn't giving in, and as he shoves the soggy cardboard to the side, his eyes land on a drenched cat, and he finally sighs with relief.

Kabocha is huddled into a corner, meowing pitifully when Ryoma slowly reaches out. It shrinks away so he waits, holding his hand still as it sniffs his fingers, inspecting him carefully before finally nuzzling his palm.

"Hey, you," he chuckles as he scoops Kabocha up, leaning forward to shelter it from the rain. As he heads home, he strokes the calico with one hand. "Hmph. You must've been really scared, huh?"

He isn't expecting a reply because Kabocha is a cat, but Ryoma's heart feels full when Kabocha meows in response, snuggling against his chest.

* * *

He's a cat owner now.

In hindsight, Ryoma isn't really surprised; as much as he's tried convincing himself otherwise, all his self-doubts about adopting Kabocha went flying out the window as soon as the thunderstorm hit. He's more surprised that he adapts so quickly, shutting Kabocha safely in the bathroom while he cleans his house.

He bathes Kabocha despite its complaints, and he finds some leftover treats in the cupboard, serving it on a cracked plate. The rain subsides, the thunder quiets, and Ryoma calls the nearest vet to set up an appointment in two days' time.

It's not until he settles in for the night, the calico curled up next to him, that he realises he didn't have any awful thoughts that day. He doesn't have any the next day either, far too preoccupied with trailing Kabocha around the house, watching it jump from furniture to furniture.

The day after, he brings Kabocha to the vet, where he learns two things. The first is that the calico isn't microchipped, something he celebrates with an honest-to-god smile and a polite thank you to the vet. Because it means that Kabocha doesn't belong to anyone.

Maybe it's impulsive, irrational, a stupid decision, but when they offer to microchip Kabocha and register him as the owner, Ryoma says *yes*.

The other thing he learns is that Kabocha is a she.

Adopting a cat is expensive, and Ryoma knows his savings will take a massive hit, but as he leaves the vet by himself, told to pick up Kabocha in a few days' time, he finds that he doesn't care.

It's weird, Ryoma reflects as he walks to the bus stop. To think that after everything he's done, after all the times he's avoided letting another animal— no, another living *thing* into his life, he's adopting a cat.

Maybe a tiny part of him whispers *you don't deserve this*, that he should leave Kabocha up for adoption by a much more loving family. But for the first time, Ryoma stifles a laugh, staring down the insecurities that infest his brain and proceeding to block them out.

* * *

Rainy summers turn into chilly autumn as Ryoma relearns the wonders of owning a cat. He replaces his false memories of a Russian blue with Kabocha; he takes pictures of her playing with toys, pets her, and talks to her as she follows him everywhere.

He feels lighter, more alive.

He has hobbies now too! He's no Angie, but doodling in the sketchbook he bought at the 100-yen shop makes him happy. Cooking isn't a chore anymore, and he actually tries keeping up with his favourite shows, watching television while petting Kabocha.

Of course, there are days when he wakes to phantom pains, heaving for oxygen he already has. There are days when he wants to sleep forever. Ryoma doesn't like calling himself suicidal, because suicidal meant rooftops at midnight or penknives against wrists, but he sure as hell was *depressed*.

Even if the killing game wasn't real, even if he never died, never killed, never actually lost his loved ones, some part of Ryoma refuses to believe it. He's still a killer, and he's still unloved. There's nothing left for him in this miserable world, except the world is just fine. It's Ryoma that's the miserable one.

But now, whenever those days hit and he wallows in bed, his cat intervenes. Today, he opens his eyes to see Kabocha watching him and barely croaks out a "Good morning," before she licks him.

Those days are still awful, the nights even worse. But Ryoma thinks Kabocha must have a sixth sense for his depressive whirlwinds because whenever he tries to waste away, she always pokes her way into the bedroom to distract him.

And it's nice.

As he watches her flop onto her belly, Ryoma's gaze drifts to his phone on the bedside table.

Maybe this is uncharacteristic of him. But after he records Kabocha rolling around on his bedsheets, Ryoma opens his messages for the first time in *months*, ignoring thousands of unread notifications to fire off a video into the V3 chat.

He ignores his phone as he pets Kabocha, briefly wondering what his castmates think of his cat.

* * *

The problem with good things is that they eventually come to an end. And for Ryoma, that means coming home just before the new year to find Kabocha hiding below his bed.

An uneasiness haunts him those few days, a gut feeling he tries pathetically to ignore, but when Kabocha doesn't come out for breakfast or dinner at all, her food mostly untouched when he slides it underneath his bed, he can't deny it anymore.

Something is amiss, and it terrifies him. It gets worse when the nightmares return in full force, except this time, he's forced to watch piranhas devour his cat, not him. All he can do is lie in bed while the sounds of New Year's fireworks echo in the distance because he doesn't know what to do.

He can't afford the hefty price of an emergency vet visit; with everything closed on New Year's, the monthly paycheck he gets isn't enough. He doesn't even know what's wrong.

Bitterly, Ryoma wonders if he's just destined to be alone.

As he reaches for his phone, sliding out of bed to check if Kabocha is still there with the flashlight, he pauses, staring at the screen.

There *is* one option he has, one that he desperately doesn't want to use. But as he opens his contacts, forcing himself to scroll through a dozen names, Ryoma's mind flashes back to waterlogged dreams of being shoved to his death. He feels physically sick.

But he also remembers the last time he spoke with her, contractually obligated to attend an event. And– *yeah* it happened a year ago, but Ryoma remembers her forlorn expression, her deep bow, her sickeningly genuine apology.

"If you need anything," she had said back then, serious and sad, "do not hesitate to call me. Nothing can make up for what I did, but if you ever require my help... I will be there."

Her words echo in his mind as he teeters between yes or no, finger hovering above the call button, until he hears a pitiful little mewl.

The phone rings once, twice, and then–

"Kirumi," he blurts out before she even gets a chance to speak, his voice hinging on desperate. He swallows the lump in his throat, squeezing his eyes shut.

"I need your help."

* * *

The waiting area feels sterile, all polished marble and white walls. Sitting in a hard chair at 3AM, Ryoma can't suppress the uneasy feeling that haunts him. He counts the floor tiles as a distraction because the alternative is his mind spiraling until he feels like he's choking and *dying*—

"I've talked to the lady at the front counter." A familiar voice cuts through his turbulent thoughts, and Ryoma looks up to see Kirumi approaching, her heels clacking against marble tiles. She sits down next to him. "I've covered the payment."

It's strange to think he's spent so long dreading talking to her. To listen to her now with nothing but a hint of anxiety…

It's unexpected. It's weird.

"Don't treat me like a charity case," Ryoma mutters, despite knowing that he can't afford the visit and Kirumi, with her designer purse and coat, probably can.

Kirumi misinterprets, because she tuts and says, "Don't let your pride get in the way of help."

"I'm not," Ryoma sighs, and it's the truth. It was never his pride that stopped him. Quite the opposite; he's never felt worthy of anybody's attention, isolating himself to avoid wasted time and money.

"I remember the video you sent of your cat," Kirumi says suddenly, and he stares. Despite the exhaustion that laces her words, she's *still* making small talk, asking, "What's her name?"

He doesn't answer. Instead, he says, "Don't waste your time talking. You can leave, I'll pay you back later."

"Nonsense." Kirumi looks at him with steely determination, and Ryoma can't help it; he *flinches*. Clearly, Kirumi notices because she falters, suddenly concerned.

"Sorry," Ryoma mumbles. "It's not you, it's—"

Me, he wants to say, but doesn't. Despite his silence, Kirumi catches on because of *course* she does; she's always been good at reading people, she targeted him even before she'd seen his motive video and learnt that he was unloved.

Kirumi, perhaps mercifully, changes the subject. "You know," she hums, "you've changed a lot since we last met."

"Have I?" Ryoma says bitterly, and she nods.

"I can't say anything for certain," Kirumi explains, voice steady and patient, "but from the looks of it, you've been doing better lately. You seem healthier too." She pauses. "My point is, Ryoma, you've grown a lot."

"Tch." Ryoma rolls his eyes. "You can't just say that. We don't talk."

"And yet, you still called me."

Ryoma freezes.

"I'm no fool," Kirumi says, not unkindly. "I'm well aware I've caused you pain and that you tend to isolate yourself. Despite that, you called me for help."

Her words make his chest twist painfully. All he can muster is a "Sorry."

Kirumi asks, "Why are you apologising?"

And Ryoma can't answer.

They sit in silence until someone enters, calling out his name. Kirumi sits with him as the employee tells him that Kabocha will be *fine*, that she has some dental infection but she'll be fine, and it's only her steady hand on his shoulder that prevents him from collapsing out of exhaustion and relief.

When the employee says he can visit Kabocha, Ryoma beckons for Kirumi to follow. If she's surprised, she masks it well, and as they walk together, she asks, "What's her name?"

It's the same question from earlier, but this time, Ryoma replies. "It's Kabocha," he says, and he sees the way Kirumi nods, her eyes crinkling as she smiles.

"Kabocha," she echoes. "What a lovely name." As they approach a wooden door, entering after the employee, Kirumi asks, "Where did you find her?"

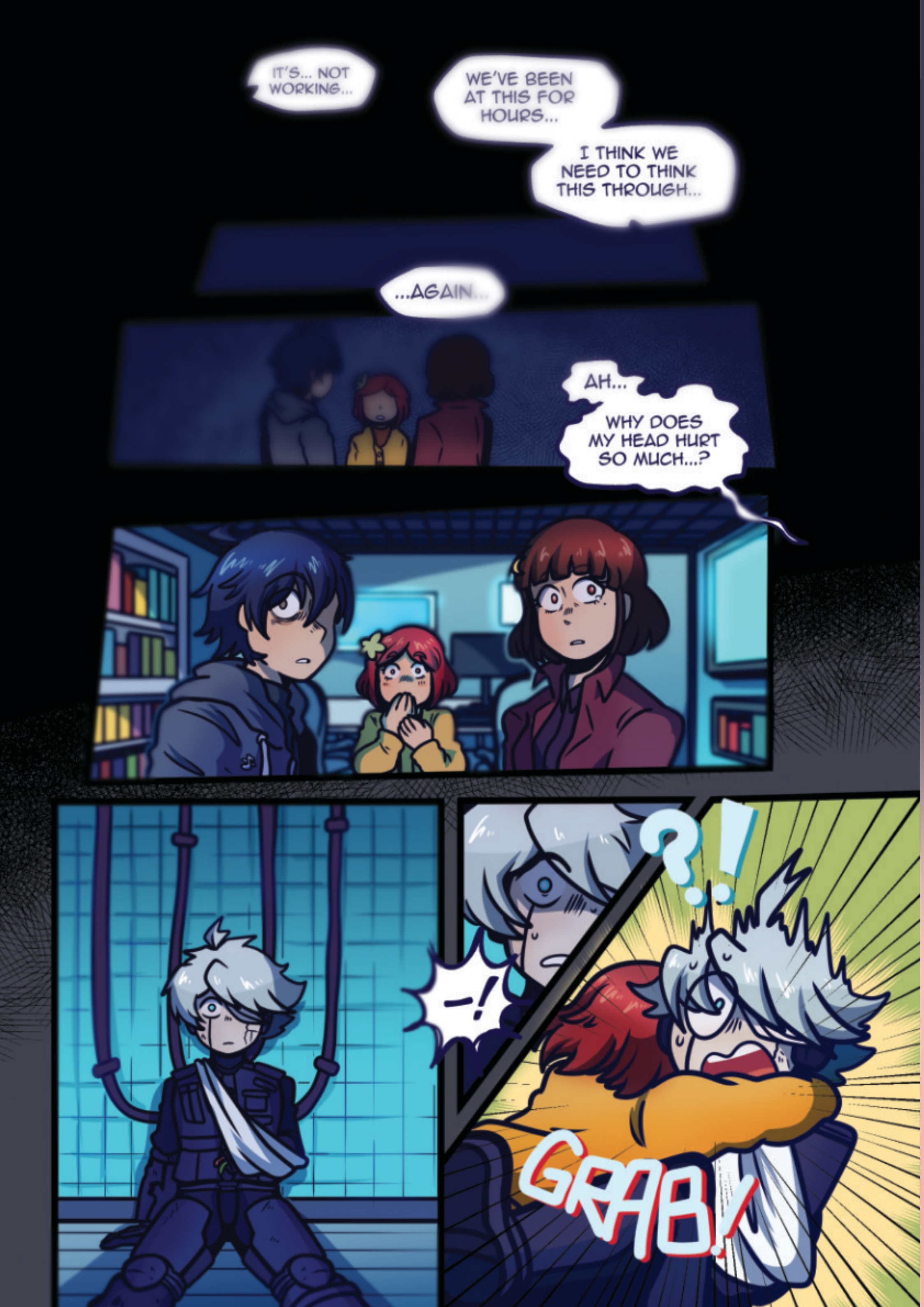
"Alleyway nearby," he answers honestly as they approach a cage. Kabocha purrs as Ryoma pokes his hand through the metal bars. "She was a stray. Kept feeding her, but I didn't want to take her in at first."

"What changed your mind?" Kirumi questions, as Kabocha nuzzles his palm.

Ryoma smiles.

"Remember that thunderstorm in June?"

* * *


IT'S... NOT WORKING...
WE'VE BEEN AT THIS FOR HOURS...
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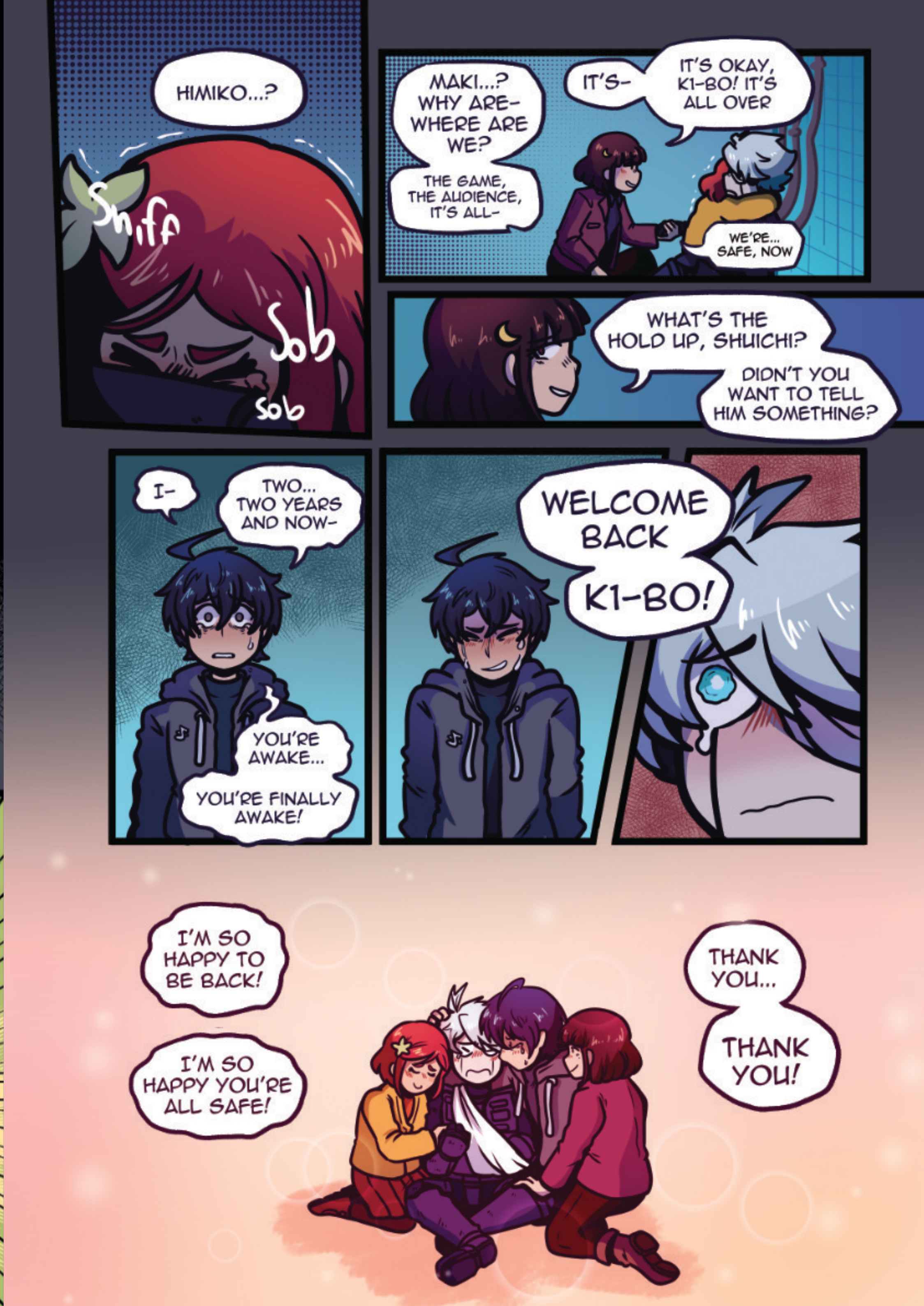

HIMIKO...?
Sniff
Sob
Sob
MAKI...? WHY ARE- WHERE ARE WE?
THE GAME, THE AUDIENCE, IT'S ALL-
IT'S-
IT'S OKAY, K1-BO! IT'S ALL OVER
WE'RE... SAFE, NOW
WHAT'S THE HOLD UP, SHUICHI?
DIDN'T YOU WANT TO TELL HIM SOMETHING?
I-
TWO... TWO YEARS AND NOW-
YOU'RE AWAKE...
YOU'RE FINALLY AWAKE!
WELCOME BACK
K1-BO!
I'M SO HAPPY TO BE BACK!
I'M SO HAPPY YOU'RE ALL SAFE!
THANK YOU...
THANK YOU!

YOU THINK I MADE YOU HURT

by Idaate

"Well, it makes sense for us to live together," she had said, scraped hands splayed outwards like a prayer. "We've all survived a killing game together. What other choice would we have?"

At first, it had seemed like the only logical conclusion. Something that she assumed, that surely, they should have as well.

* * *

She sees them mostly through interviews and fax machines.

The latter are the reports that Team *Danganronpa* sends to the mailing list they haven't bothered to remove her from. Descriptions there are surgical and precise, things that might become concerns if an eye wasn't kept on it.

They've moved into an apartment.

Saihara has increased his dosage of XXXX.

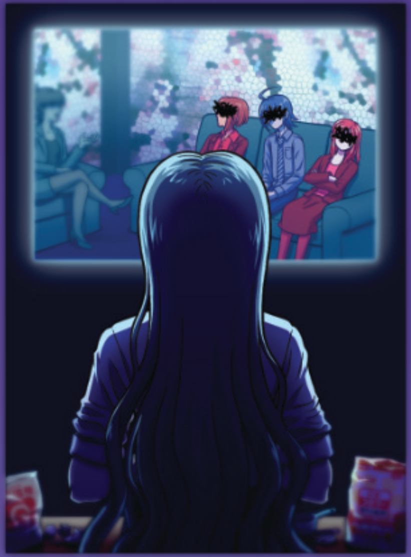
Yumeno is considering work at XXXX.

Harukawa's decided to cut her hair.

It's all laid out for her in black and beige, descriptions that would seem unreal if she didn't know the faces behind it. When she had come out of the game, a whole stack of the papers had been jammed in the machine, another thing she didn't turn off. Lines like *Akamatsu has passed away* read like something you'd see in the newspaper's obituary, a tragedy utterly removed from her except she actually knew the girl.

The former are pieces that she's picked up beforehand, talk shows where one or three of them sit with practiced ease and narrate what people want to hear.

Saihara cries on television over Momota as Harukawa promises to the camera that his memory will never be forgotten. The host nods and sympathizes as if a teen's death was something that couldn't be helped. Shirogane knows, because she's helped organize interviews for past survivors, that the three of them will likely share a bucket to vomit in after the fact.



It's all mostly normal, except for when she's listening to an interview in the background (coincidental, of course, because she wouldn't seek them out) and the host asks, *"How do you feel with Shirogane still alive?"*

She pauses, flour settling through the air.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it is truly unusual to have a Mastermind survive. They're typically executed in one manner or another, or killed by the Survivors themselves like in Season 34. I don't believe we've had a Mastermind survive for a good... fifteen years or so, now? So I really must ask, what's your relationship like?"

Shirogane stares at her recipe. She's made these waffles before, dozens of times now, and knows how to do it by heart.

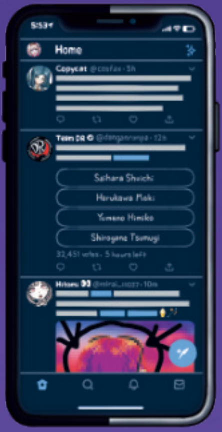
"We can't say we're particularly close to her, no," Shirogane can hear Harukawa's forced smile through the screen, *"but that doesn't mean we don't have a respectable working relationship with her."*

They haven't spoken in what, four, five years? It hardly matters. Shirogane smudges her remote up with butter and turns the television off.

* * *

Shirogane wants to go to the beach.

She wants to go because the beach is fun, because it's summer turning to fall and most people are back to school or work or otherwise generally don't care terribly much for the weather. She wants to go because she's in the area, and the sun is bathing the sky in pink and purple and red and because that's a pretty look.



It has no relation, none whatsoever, to the tweets flying around that Yumeno's been seen at an ice cream shop on the boardwalk, that Team *Danganronpa* reported the three of them are vacationing in the area for the next week or so.

They see her in the distance, maybe even before she's spotted them. They're on the boardwalk, ordering something from some stand as she strides in- not, not *their* direction, but the end of the beach as she needs to get there, to walk the whole pace of it and see all the sights. Her strides are naturally long and fast, and if their own happen to quicken, that is none of her concern.

"Shirogane."

She's in front of them, mere feet away. She blinks owlishly and surveys the scene: Harukawa a half step in front of the others, Saihara and Yumeno inches behind respectively, the latter with a massive ice cream cone held in her hand, the rumors accurate. Shirogane smiles widely.

"Well, it's a plain coincidence to see you all here toda-"

"You made a beeline for us from the other end of the beach," states Harukawa.

Hm. Shirogane purses her lips. "I suppose it might appear that way," she says.

"Appear- Shirogane, listen." Saihara speaks up now, brow crickled and uncomfortable. "We'd appreciate it if you respected our privacy."

"But of course!" Shirogane spreads her arms to the side. "To make my presence as small and as unirate as possible; our goals are the same!"

"So," prompts Saihara, "you can leave."

"Hm. Well, isn't that a bit unfair?" She tilts her head to the side. "I don't think it'd be much of a bother to exchange a few pleasantries."

"Uhm..." Yumeno murmurs for the first time, "well... hi."

"Hello!"

Harukawa and Saihara look at Shirogane, expressions firm.

She should leave. She really should leave. This sort of situation isn't going to do anything but make things worse- but things were never really wrong in the first place, so Shirogane doesn't really need to stress about that, right? They're tired, this is simply awkward in the way that seeing your boss on a day off is awkward. There's nothing else behind it, there's no hidden malice, there's nothing else, it's-

"Ah."

Yumeno's ice cream slips off of her cone. She had maybe licked a little too hard or the server had pressed a little too lightly, but one way or another it had begun rolling its way off.

Shirogane jumps forward, hands cupped and outstretched as she tries to catch it before it hits the sand, elbows awkward and pointed before she feels something shove against her side.

"Don't you *dare*-"

The world spins, her vision goes blurry, and the breath is knocked out of her all in one smooth motion as she finds herself staring at what she thinks at the sky with Harukawa leaning above her but really could be anything. She spits, and sand comes out of her mouth, causing a groan and then a sickening sensation in her gut but she can't puke, that's neither here nor there nor *appropriate*, and there's really no reason to puke when nothing's going wrong, when she's just sitting there.

"Are you okay?" Harukawa asks in a hushed tone, and because Shirogane is stupid, for a brief moment she thinks she's speaking to her.

"Mm-mhm," Yumeno mumbles.

Shirogane can't get up.

She- She *can*, physically she knows she has the strength in her. At worst she has a little sand in her eye, maybe a scrape on the knee. No broken bones, no concussion, no reason to lay here other than to try and soak up pity that'll never come.

"Uhm... Shirogane-san?" Yumeno asks.

"Yumeno-san," Saihara says, a warning.

"N-no, I'm fine, haha." Shirogane pulls herself up, head ringing. "I, uh... I'm just sitting here."

"Are you okay?" Yumeno asks quietly.

Shirogane has no response.

"What?" says Saihara, soft and cold. "Are you going to pull the same shtick all over again?"

"No, I'm not-"

"And why's that?" Saihara's eyes narrow. "What could *possibly* be different from then and now."

"It's. It's because," Shirogane says.

"Because?" Harukawa raises an eyebrow.

"...b-because?" Yumeno shrinks further behind Saihara's back.

"Because?" Saihara prompts, tone as flat as always.

And Shirogane, choking on her tongue, can't find the words.

* * *

"Survived?" Harukawa had spat the words out, and against her open hands they had stung. "*Together?* I'm going to puke."

Yumeno looked Shirogane up and down from where she had sat on the hospital bed, a splotch of red against white sheets. "I don't..." She had flicked her nail up from underneath her finger. "Uhm, i-it's not like you can say we're the same."

"Are we not?" Shirogane had tilted her head to the side. "We both signed up for this Killing Game. The role of Mastermind was something I was plainly lucky enough to be assigned, while the rest of you were not so fortunate-"

She's interrupted by a resounding *slam* on a nearby table. It takes a moment for her to look over at Saihara on the side, his shoulders tense and angry, as he pulls himself back up. There's still a scar on his face, a thin line from the rubble that had nearly crushed him as he had run forward to push Shirogane out of the way.

"You're not like us," he said coldly. "We're not the people that we were when we signed up for this game, and you haven't changed a bit. And you don't seem to want to, frankly."

Shirogane's mouth opened, then closed. Her head dipped. Saihara made his way to the door.

"You're alive," he said, "and that's more than what most people I know could say."

* * *

She hurt them.

And that's all that they can see her for.

That... should be something obvious. She framed Akamatsu for a murder she didn't commit, she watched them cry and offered to wipe their tears while talking to people backstage about how best to milk this for views. She led them in circles and lied and told the truth in the most painful way because their reactions were dollars and their trauma was a business expense.

"Sh-Shirogane?" says Yumeno.

She blinks, and everyone's looking at her all blurry-like. It's 'cause her glasses broke, she knows this, no other reason. Of course her vision is blurry when she doesn't have glasses. That's why. That's why.

She can't exactly blame them for this.

"Because I'm sorry," she says, and it doesn't feel like they're her words.

Shirogane never says things directly, never does things directly, never takes the action herself. It's easier to be someone else, to let someone else assume, to let them make you do something so she can float through life.

"Because I'm so, so sorry-" she swallows thickly, "and. I just want you to know that."

It's less of a white flag and more of a knife, a violent declaration that's come too late with no benefit to anyone

Yumeno says, "I can't forgive you-"

"As you shouldn't," and Shirogane's able to say that clearly, for once. "It'd be exceptionally stupid of you to-"

"-but I can live with you," Yumeno cuts her off. "I. Uhm, I can see that you... mean it."

"Yumeno-san," Saihara says sharply.

"What? It's not like she's-"

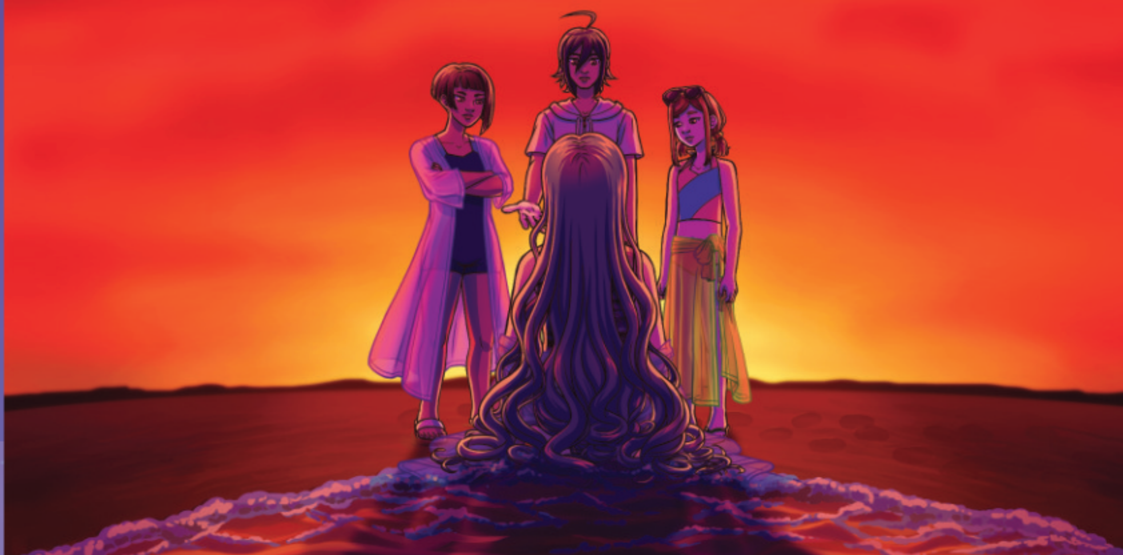
"Lying? And how do you know that?" There is no spite in his voice, only cold, continuous matter of fact.

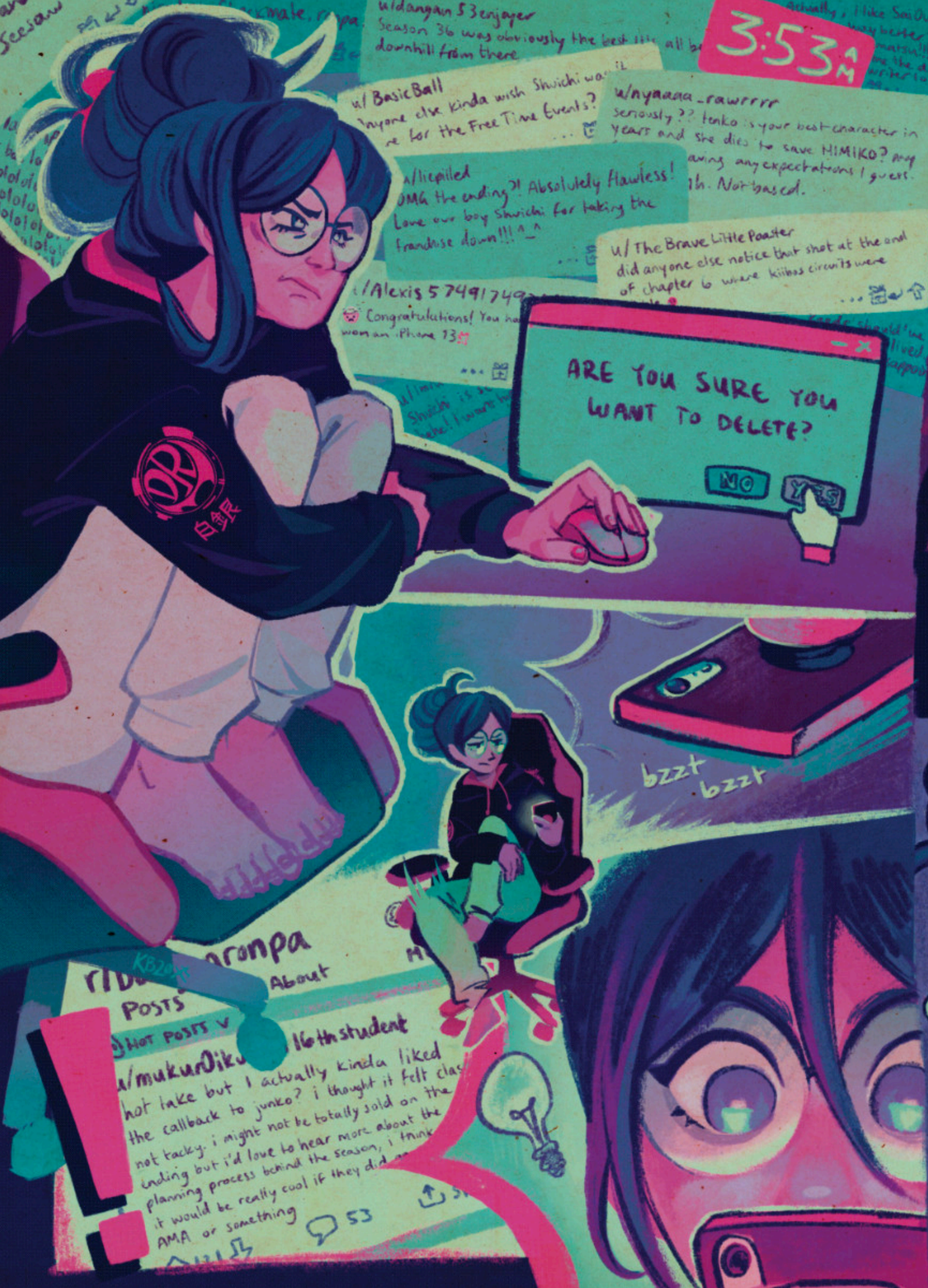
"I don't! I don't, but..." Yumeno bites her lip. "It's. Not like anybody else can die. Not in the way they used to."

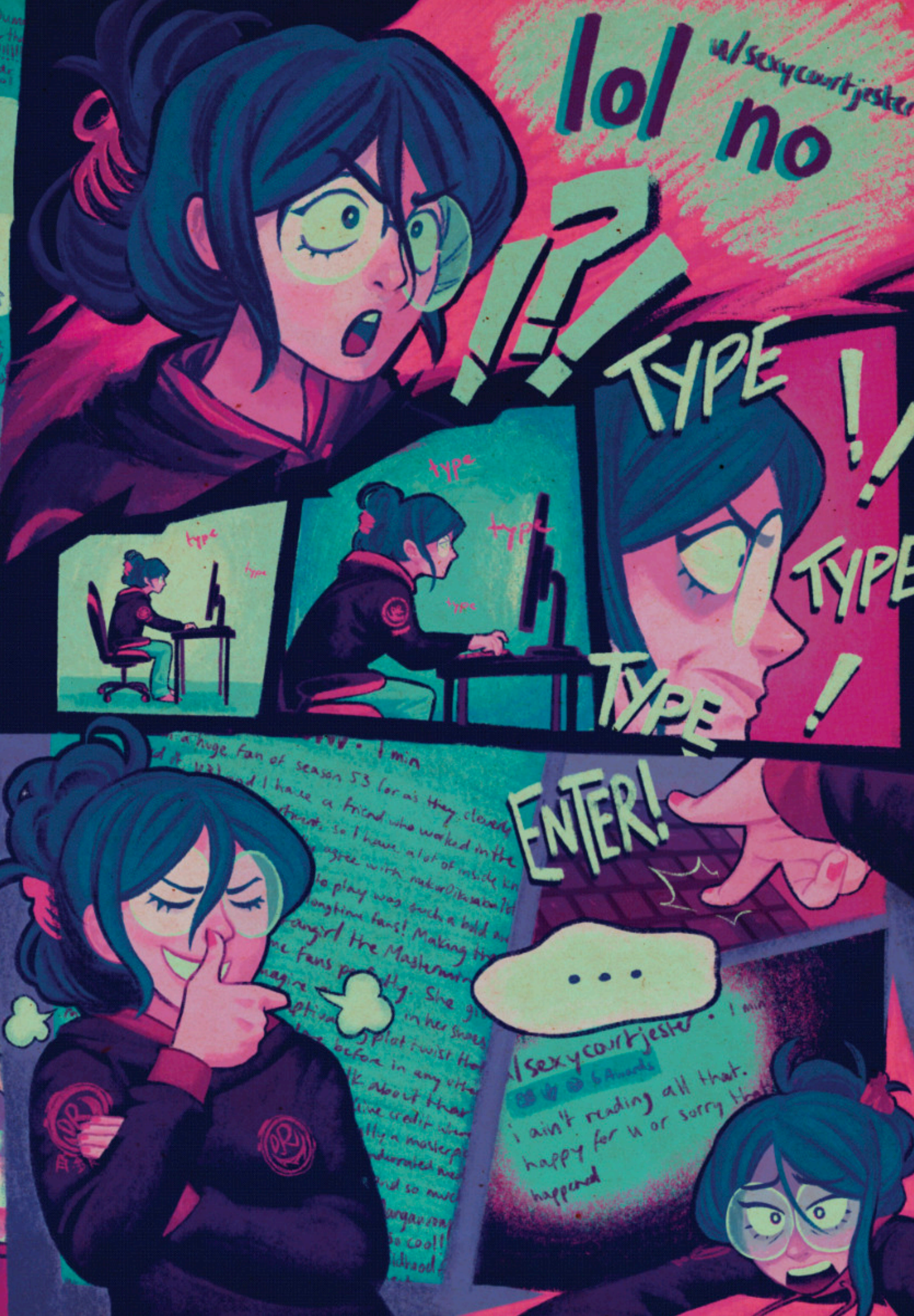
Except...

The word hangs unheavy and uncertain in the air, and as much as Shirogane wants to hang her head, all she can do is look up at the beautiful people in front of her.

"I think... it's more for us, Saihara," says Harukawa, tone flat and gentle all the same. "I don't want us to live like this anymore."




Seesaw
Checkmate, ronpa.
u/dangan53enjoyer
Season 36 was obviously the best it's all been downhill from there
3:53 AM
Actually, I like SeiOuma way better than marsh!!!!!
u/BasicBall
Anyone else kinda wish Shuichi was in more for the Free Time Events?
u/nyaaaa_rawrrrr
seriously?? tenko is your best character in years and she dies to save HIMIKO? Any ... aving any expectations I guess. ... h. Not based.
u/liepilled
OMG the ending?! Absolutely flawless! Love our boy Shuichi for taking the franchise down!!! ^_^
u/The Brave Little Poaster
did anyone else notice that shot at the end of chapter 6 where kiibos circuits were
u/Alexis57491749
Congratulations! You have won an iPhone 13
Shuichi is so cute! I want
Kaede should've lived
ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO DELETE?
NO
YES
bzzt
bzzt
r/Danganronpa
POSTS
About
HOT POSTS
16th student
u/mukuroDik
hot take but I actually kinda liked the callback to junko? i thought it felt clas not tacky. i might not be totally sold on the ending but i'd love to hear more about the planning process behind the season, i think it would be really cool if they did an AMA or something
53
KB20XX
!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ENTER!
a huge fan of season 53 for as they closely ... and I have a friend who worked in the ... so I have a lot of inside kn... agree with mukuroDikusakon1... to play was such a bold ... longtime fans! Making the ... fangirl the Mastermind ... fans perfectly. She gi... in her shoes ... plot twist ... before in any other ... about that ... give credit where ... lly a masterp... underrated ... and so much ... so cool! ... childhood
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...
u/sexycourtjester • 1 min
6 Awards
i ain't reading all that. happy for u or sorry that happend

V3's most disliked
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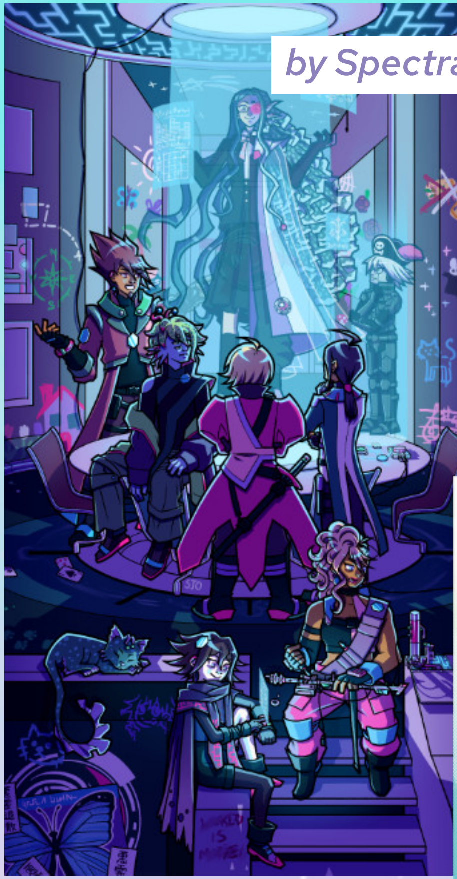

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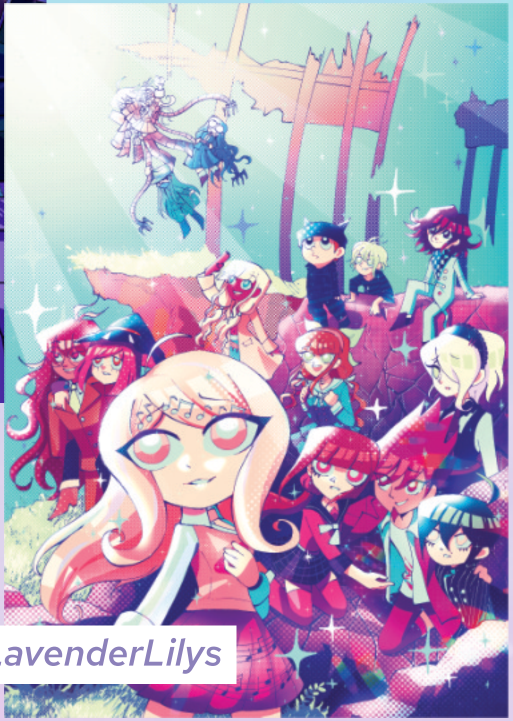

by LavenderLilys

by eleven

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Tsumugi Shirogane
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